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By A. E. VAN VOGT

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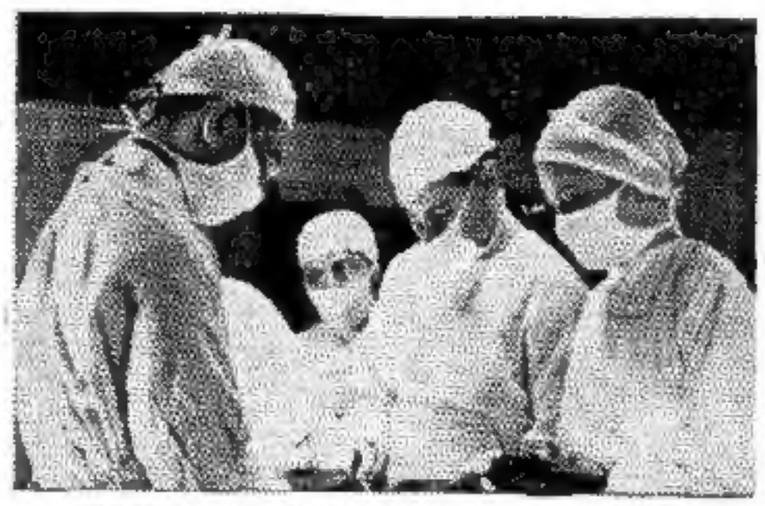

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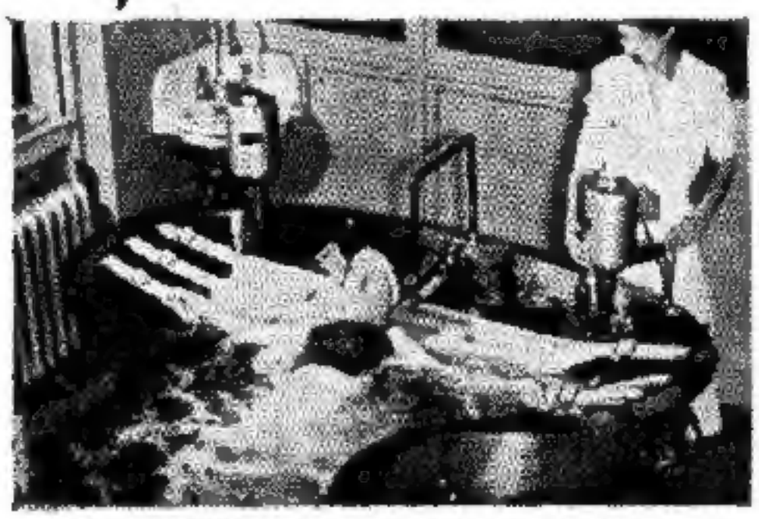

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FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

Vol. 4, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION SUMMER, 1952

A Book-Length Science Fiction Classic

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SAMUEL MINES, *Editor*

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A DEPARTMENT WHERE SCIENCE FICTION READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

WE ARE accustomed to picturing Earth as a ball of mud with polar ice caps at opposite ends, bands of varied climate between and the whole sprinkled with continents and seas in a familiar colored pattern. We think of this as the normal appearance of the earth.

It isn't anything of the kind.

Normally the earth looks more like a lake.

I was jolted out of my own complacency about the globe by the briefest dip into geology. We are living in a very temporary and abnormal interval, a fraction of a moment in the earth's geologic history. All man's striving, all that long slow climb up from the caves, all the bloody wars, the rise and fall of empires, the groping toward knowledge—all this has been done in the wink of an eye while the planet readies itself for a return to its normal condition.

No Extremes

What is the Earth's normal state? No polar regions, to begin with. The whole planet enjoys a mild uniform temperature without extremes from north to south. Now, if you melt the unthinkable tons of water locked up in ice at the Arctic and Antarctic, all the oceans of the world would rise 150 feet in depth. Huge areas of the continents would disappear. Florida would be a memory and most of Long Island; in the Tidewater flats of Virginia and south along the Carolinas the ocean would sweep in to the Appalachians.

Louisiana and the Gulf states would similarly be engulfed and a broad lake of water would creep up the Mississippi valley and spread inexorably out over the plains west to the Rockies, east to the Blue Ridge and the Smokies. New York City would go and Philadelphia and London and Singapore and Rio De Janeiro. Only the hills would be left to thrust up their crests; elsewhere a broad, placid, warm sea would cover the globe.

It is intriguing to realize that Man has never known a normal phase of the earth. Man is a phenomenon of the Ice Age. There have been four of these glaciations in our globe's history, spaced about 250,000,000 years apart and each lasting for a very short time—perhaps 30,000 years.

A Hairline Balance

We have no way of telling just where we now stand in the geologic calendar, how much time we have left, whether we are in the middle of this ice age or at the end. If you feel like enjoying a good scare you can give yourself the jitters by reflecting that the winters have been growing definitely warmer for the past 50 years. Add to that the happy bit of information that all we need is an annual average rise in temperature of two degrees to melt the ice caps and start the oceans moving. By so hairline a balance does man maintain his precarious existence on the globe.

But before you go into any Orson Wellesian panics it is only fair to tell you that warmer winters for 50 years or 100 years do not indicate anything of world-shaking importance. In fact it is quite normal, if we may use the word, for the weather to run in cycles.

The basic weather cycle is 100 years from cold to warm. We are now in the closing years of a warm cycle and by 1980 will be moving into a colder one. There is also a longer weather cycle of 170 years which sometimes reinforces, sometimes opposes the 100 year cycle. And then there is a crescendo about every 510 years when five of the 100-year cycles have been completed.

Scientists who enjoy charting these matters have noticed that international wars occur dur-

(Continued on page 139)

KNOWLEDGE
THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
PYRAMIDS

A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

AMENHOTEP IV,
Founder of Egypt's
Mystery Schools

This Sealed Book—FREE

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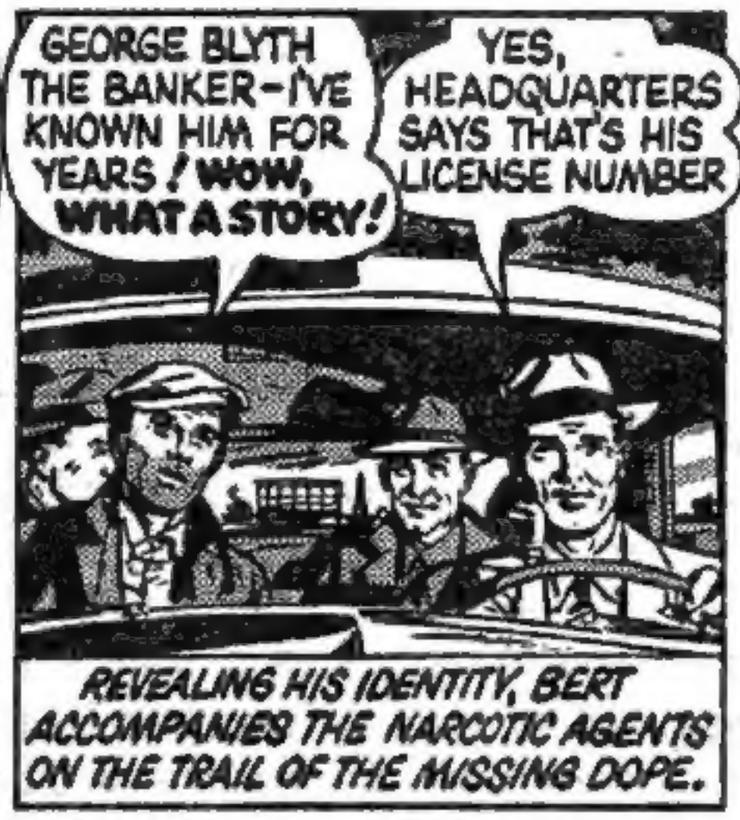
REPORTER'S HUNCH PAYS OFF TWO WAYS...

MASQUERADING AS A "SKID ROW" CHARACTER TO GATHER FEATURE MATERIAL FOR HIS NEWSPAPER, BERT EVENS, FAMOUS REPORTER, WITNESSES A PECULIAR HAPPENING...

THOUGHT YOU GAVE US THE SLIP-EH? HAND OVER THE DOPE!
I'VE QUIT PEDDLING IT
HE SLIPPED SOMETHING INTO A GIRL'S SEDAN...LICENSE NUMBER 062-451



REVEALING HIS IDENTITY, BERT ACCOMPANIES THE NARCOTIC AGENTS ON THE TRAIL OF THE MISSING DOPE.

MY PAPER WANTS MISS BLYTH'S PICTURE. MAY I DROP IT OFF AND SEE YOU AT HEADQUARTERS?
OKAY, BUT HURRY. WE NEED YOUR STATEMENT TO CLEAR MISS BLYTH

MAY I RETURN YOUR PICTURE TOMORROW, MISS BLYTH?
PLEASE DO?
HE'S HANDSOME
CAN'T YOU MAKE IT AROUND SIX AND DINE WITH US?
ONE HOUR LATER...

BECAUSE THEY GIVE QUICK, EASY SHAVES EVERY TIME, THIN GILLETTES ARE AMERICA'S MOST POPULAR LOW-PRICE BLADES. FAR KEENER THAN ORDINARY BLADES, THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY...NEVER NICK OR SCRAPE. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE HANDY 10-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT
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A Pill for Dr. Freud

Can Psychiatry Come in Bottles?

THE patient was seriously ill. His personality had undergone shocking changes. He had become obstinate, contrary and showed a tendency to go into trance-like, catatonic stupors, during which he would not move or help himself in any way.

Schizophrenia was the diagnosis, the terrifying mental disease which accounts for a quarter of the hospitalized invalids in the country.

There was a time when the diagnosis of schizophrenia meant confinement in an institution with either no cure in sight, or a long and incredibly complicated analysis by a psychiatrist who took years to probe and probe into the patient's personality in an attempt to discover the personality disorders which had led to the breakdown. It meant laying bare the most intimate details of a man's life, uncovering the motives for the most trivial acts of his daily routine. And it meant detective work of a very high order on the part of the psychiatrist, whose success or failure was dependent largely upon his skill in guiding the patient.

Improvement in the case depended upon the ruthless efficiency with which suppressed memories were dredged up and brought to light, plus a lot of other intangible factors. And there was never any guarantee of success.

But the doctor who had just pronounced the verdict of schizophrenia did not look perturbed. He did not speak of psychiatry or hospitals or sanitaria. He reached for his prescription pad and scribbled a few words.

"Give him one tablet every four hours," he instructed. "I'll look in towards the end of the week. Should be well under control by then."

A pill for schizophrenia? This is fantasy—at least it is in the future. But like all good science fiction, it is only an extension of known facts. And the fact is that a drug is now available which has a demonstrable, therapeutic effect on catonic schizophrenia.

The drug is known as cholinesterase. It was developed by Dr. Stephen L. Sherwood of Middlesex Hospital, London, and Dr. Warren S. McCullough and Ellen Ridley, psychiatrists of the University of Illinois. In its present stage of development, it is injected directly into the brain.

Cholinesterase is produced from human blood. Its function, in the normal human body, is to inhibit the activities of a chemical called acetylcholine, which is produced at nerve endings in the voluntary muscles. Too much acetylcholine results in the catatonic-like symptoms characteristic of this type of schizophrenia. And a dose of cholinesterase, counteracting the acetylcholine, relieves the symptoms and brings prompt, if temporary, relief to the patient.

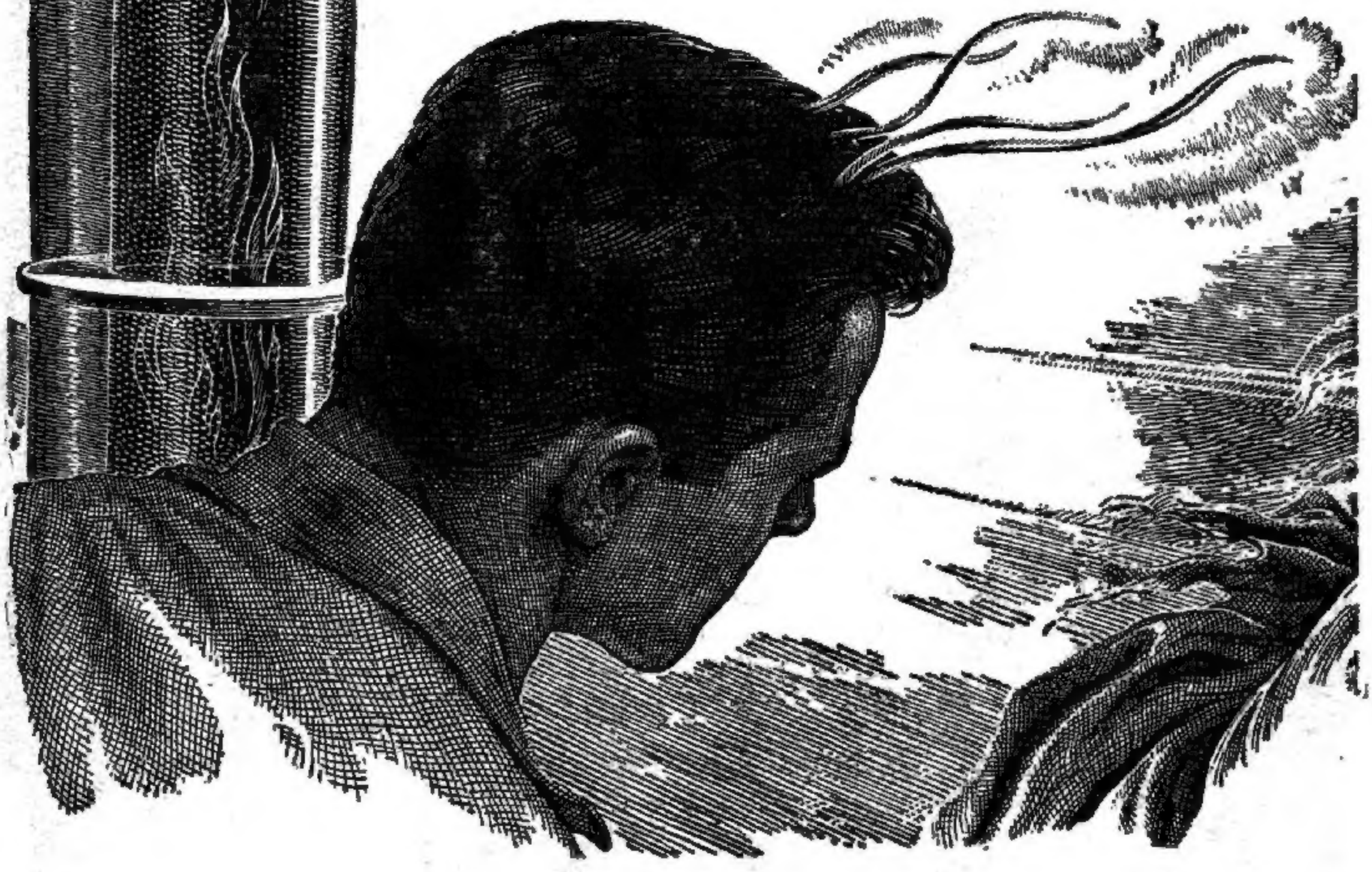
There is significance here beyond the first crude steps of a new therapy. Hitherto neurotic disorders have been treated mainly on a non-material basis. If it can be demonstrated that functional illness has a chemical basis, treatment becomes the relatively simple business of restoring the body's chemical balance instead of probing for the tenuous hidden factors of personality troubles, of defeats and disappointments and frustrations of personality.

The clue has always existed. Every human being suffers from frustrations and defeats. Yet some become neurotic and some do not. That fact alone should have pointed the way to a difference in chemistry. Will the whole profession of psychiatry give way to the corner drug store?

Pardon us, we've got a date with our psychiatrist.

SLAN

A Novel by A. E. van VOGT



I

HIS mother's hand felt cold, clutching his.

Her fear, as they walked hurriedly along the street, was a quiet, swift pulsation that throbbed from her mind to his. A hundred other thoughts beat against his mind, from the crowds that swarmed by on either side, and from inside the buildings as they passed. But only his mother's thoughts were clear and coherent—and afraid!

"They're following us, Jommy," her brain telegraphed. "They're not sure, but they suspect. Somebody reported us, and our house has already been raided. Jommy, if the worst comes, you know what to do; we've practised it often enough. And, Jommy, don't be afraid, don't lose your head. You may be only nine years old, but a nine-year-

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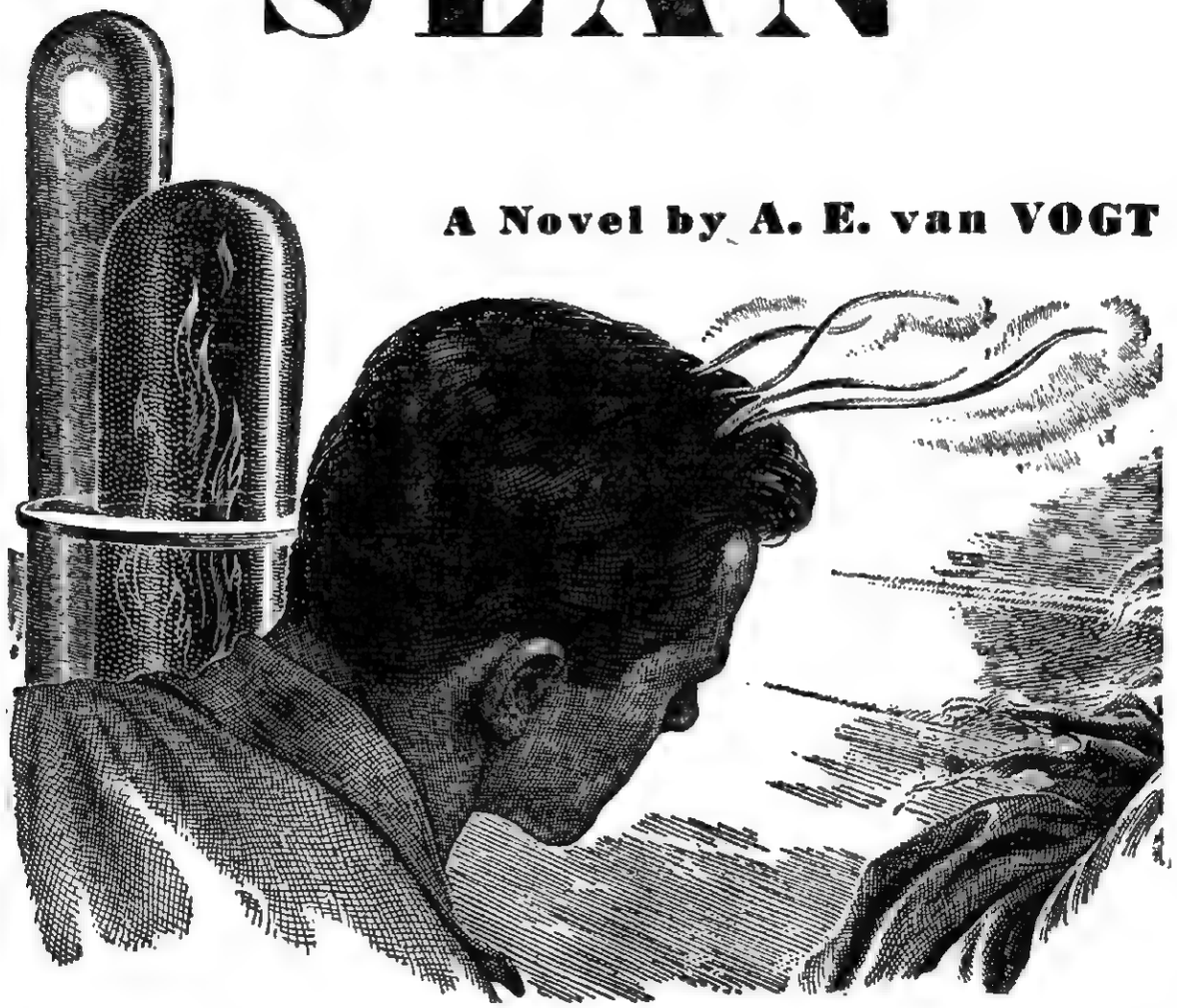

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Granny now hurled herself at Joanna

They were hunted like mad, dangerous beasts . . . but the telepathic slans were the real inheritors of man's future

Granny now hurled herself at Joanna

They were hunted like mad, dangerous beasts . . . but the

telepathic sions were the real inheritors of man's future

old slan is as intelligent as any fifteen-year-old human being. Don't be afraid, no matter what happens."

Don't be afraid! Easy to advise, Jommy thought, and hid the thought from her. She wouldn't like that concealment, but she mustn't know he was afraid, too.

"Jommy, do you feel their hostility? Can you sense things over a distance yet?"

He strained. From somewhere came the stray wisp of thought:

"They say there are still some slans alive in this city, and the order is to shoot them on sight. Their internal organs are different from ours, you know, and their heads—"

"Jommy, can you feel them, about a block behind us? In a big car! Waiting for reinforcements to close in on us from in front. They're working fast—too fast. Can you catch their thoughts, Jommy?"

He couldn't! No matter how hard he reached out with his mind and strained and perspired with the fierceness of his trying. That was where her mature powers surpassed his precocious instincts. She could span distances and disentangle remote vibrations into coherent pictures.

He wanted to turn around and look, but he didn't dare. His small though long legs twinkled underneath him, half running to keep up with his mother's impatient pace.

HIS MOTHER'S thoughts stabbed through his hard reflections! "There're some ahead of us now, Jommy, and others coming across the street. You'll have to go now, darling. Don't forget what I've told you. You live for one thing only: To make it possible for slans to live normal lives. I think you'll have to kill our great enemy, Kier Gray, even if it means going to the grand palace after him. Remember, there'll be shouting and confusion, but keep your head. When people are confused, it's easy to fool them. Good luck, Jommy."

Not until she released his hand, after one quick squeeze, did Jommy realize that the tenor of her thoughts had changed. The fear was gone. A soothing tranquillity flowed from her brain, quieting his jumping nerves, slowing the pounding of his two hearts.

As Jommy slipped from her, he had a brief glimpse of men bearing down on the tall, graceful figure of his mother.

Men in civilian clothes were crossing the street with a quiet purposefulness. The hatred that was a shadow in their minds leaped out at Jommy; and it puzzled him even in this tremendous moment when his wits were concentrated on escape.

Why was it necessary that he should die? He and this wonderful, sensitive, intelligent mother of his! It was all wrong, terribly wrong.

A car, glittering like a long jewel in the sun, flashed up to the curb. A voice lashed out from it; a man's harsh voice and harsher accompanying thought, that stabbed after Jommy:

"Stop! There's the kid! Don't let that kid get away! Stop that boy!"

People stopped and stared; and then he had rounded the corner and was racing along Capitol Avenue. A car was pulling from the curb. His feet pattered with mad speed; his abnormally strong fingers caught at the rear bumper. He pulled himself aboard and hung on as the car swung into the maze of traffic, and then fought clear, and plunged along the smooth pavement. From somewhere behind came his mother's thought:

"Good luck, Jommy!"

For nine years she had schooled him for this moment, but something caught in his throat as he replied:

"Good luck—mother!"

The car went fast. The miles reeled off swiftly. Persons paused in the street and stood staring at the little boy clinging so grimly and precariously to the shining bumper.

Brain vibrations poured out at him from the inside of the car. As he caught the icy thoughts of the men inside, a

cold shudder throbbed through Jommy. In terror, he half lowered himself toward the pavement, prepared to let go. He looked down—and dizzily pulled himself back into place. The pavement was a gray, sickening blur, distorted by the car's reckless speed.

The thoughts of the driver were concentrated on his task of maneuvering the machine. His name was Sam Enders, chauffeur and bodyguard to the man beside him—John Petty, chief of the secret police of all-powerful Kier Gray.

Petty's identity penetrated through Jommy like an electric shock. The notorious slan hunter sat relaxed, indifferent to the speed of the car, his mind geared to a slow, meditative mood. Overtones came through that told of a chill, remorseless character, a steel-hard, dominating man, a highly trained and brilliant brain.

Suddenly there was a tail end of thought, brought to the surface of a flurry of passion that shattered the man's calm:

"—I've got to kill that slan girl, Kathleen Layton. That's the only way to undermine Kier Gray—"

FRANTICALLY Jommy attempted to follow the thought. A slan girl named Kathleen Layton to be killed so that Kier Gray might be undermined.

"Boss," came Sam Enders' suggestion, "will you turn that switch? The red light that flashed on is the general alarm."

Jommy grew tense with fear as Enders' brain received the message on the general alarm:

"—All cars on Capitol Avenue and vicinity watch for boy holding onto bumper of a sixty electro Studebaker. Boy is believed to be a slan named Jommy Cross, son of Patricia Cross, who was killed ten minutes ago at the corner of Main and Capitol. The boy leaped to the bumper of a car, which drove away rapidly, witnesses report—"

"By golly, boss!" snapped Sam Enders, "we're on Capitol Avenue. We'd better stop and help in the search. There's ten thousand reward for slans."

Brakes screeched; the speed of the car slackened. Just before the car stopped, Jommy lowered himself to the pavement. His feet jerked him into a run. He darted past an old woman, who clutched at him, avarice in her mind; and then onto a vacant lot beyond which towered a long series of blackened brick and concrete buildings, the beginning of the factory district.

A thought leaped after him from the car, viciously: "Enders! That boy—there he is! Shoot him, you fool!"

The sense of the man Enders drawing his gun came so vividly to Jommy

About This Novel

DESPITE the publication by van Vogt of more sophisticated and considerably more complicated stories since SLAN was written, there is a very large school of thought which continues to regard this story, of all his works, with the greatest affection. It is wonderfully swift reading, it is consistently interesting, dramatic and human. Its popularity is best described by the simple fact that it became a collector's item less than 12 years after its original publication and there ensued a lively rivalry for possession of rare copies. This intense interest in SLAN persists. If you are reading it for the first time we envy you.

—The Editor

that he felt the hissing rasp of metal on leather in his brain. Almost, he saw the man take aim, so clear was the mental impression that bridged the hundred and fifty feet between them.

Jommy ducked sideways as the gun went off with a dull *plop*. He had the faintest awareness of a blow. Then he scrambled up some steps into an open doorway, into a great, dimly lighted warehouse.

It was strange how blurred everything was becoming. Jommy stumbled on through a vague world, conscious only that, in spite of his tireless muscles, a man could run at least twice as fast as his best speed would carry him.

The vast warehouse was a dull light-world of looming box shapes, and floors that stretched into the remote semi-darkness. Far ahead, and to his right, he saw a bright opening, a door. He bore in that direction.

He reached the door, vaguely amazed at his weariness. Something damp and sticky was clinging to his side, and his muscles felt queerly stiff. His mind wouldn't think straight. He paused and peered out of the door.

He found himself staring onto a street—a hopeless, dingy street of cracked pavement, the opposite side lined with ill-painted houses and crumbling old tenements. The street seemed deserted. Thoughts came only from the buildings.

Jommy lowered himself over the edge of the warehouse platform and dropped to the hard cement of the road below. Anguish engulfed his side. The blow of striking the walk was a hard, jarring thump that vibrated his very bones.

The world was queerly darker as he raced across the street. He shook his head to clear his vision, but it was no use. He could only scamper on with leaden feet, between a ramshackle two-story house and a towering ruin of a brick tenement.

Swaying with the strange weakness that blurred his vision, Jommy rounded the rear corner of the ugly tenement.

HE EMERGED into a tiny back yard piled high with empty boxes on one side. An idea flashed into his dulled mind, and in an instant he was climbing up the pile.

The pain of the effort was like teeth clamped into his side. He ran precariously along over the boxes, and then half lowered himself, half fell into a space between two old boxes. The space opened all the way to the ground. In the almost darkness his eyes made out a deeper darkness in the brick wall of the tenement. He put out his hands and fumbled around the edges of a hole in the brick.

In a moment he had squeezed through and was lying exhausted on the damp earth inside. Pieces of rock pressed into his body, but for the instant he was too weary to do anything but lie there, scarcely breathing. Soon he heard a mob pour into the street outside and begin a frantic search for him. They had followed him from Capitol Avenue. But Jommy felt no fear. In this well hidden hole Jommy was sure there could be no danger of discovery.

The darkness was soothing, like his mother's thoughts just before she had told him to leave her. Somebody climbed some stairs just above him; and that told him where he was—in a little space underneath back stairs, which was probably why the hole had never been mended.

Lying there, he thought of his mother—dead now, the radio said. Dead! She wouldn't have been afraid, of course. He knew only too well that she had longed for the day when she could join her dead husband in the peace of the grave.

He pushed the thought from him because his throat suddenly ached from the thinking of it. His mind was not so blurred now, as if the rest had done him good. He was lucky to have found this hole. It was odd to be thinking of that hole and to realize that somebody else —somebody out there—was thinking of the same hole. The shock of that vague outside thought was a flame that

scorched through Jommy.

Appalled, he fought to isolate that thought and the mind that held it. But there were too many other minds all around, too much excitement. Soldiers and police swarmed in the alleyway, searching every block, every building.

And all the time he felt the thought of that other person out there, a sly, knowing thought, hopelessly mingled with the wild current of thoughts that beat on his brain. Not once did that somebody else stop thinking about this very hole. Jommy couldn't tell whether it was man or woman. But it was there, like an evil vibration from a warped brain.

The thought was still there, dim and menacing, as the mob retreated into distance, and the shouts faded. The hunters hunted elsewhere. For a long time Jommy could hear them, but finally the noise faded out; and he knew that night was falling.

But Jommy dared wait no longer. Somewhere out there was the mind that had *known* he was in the hole and had said nothing—an evil mind that filled him with unholy premonition. He had an urgency to be away from this place.

AT LAST, he squeezed carefully out of the hole. His side twinged from the movement, and a surge of awful weakness blurred his mind, but he dared not hold back. Slowly he pulled himself to the top of the boxes. His legs were lowering to the ground when he heard the rapid footfalls—and the first sense of the person who had been waiting there struck into him.

A thin hand grabbed his ankle, and an old woman's voice croaked triumphantly. "That's right, come down to Granny. Granny'll take care of you, she will. Granny's smart. She suspected all the time you had crept into that hole; and those fools never suspected. Oh, yes, Granny knows slans can read thoughts. So she kept her mind very still, thinking only of cooking. It fooled you, didn't it? She knew it would. Granny'll look after you. Granny hates the police, too."

With a gasp of dismay, Jommy recognized the rapacious old woman who had clutched at him as he ran from John Petty's car. That one fleeting glimpse had impressed the evil one on his brain. And now, so much of horror breathed from her withered, twisted brain, so hideous were her intentions, that he gave a little squeal and kicked out at her.

The heavy stick in her free hand came down on his head, even as he realized for the first time that she had such a weapon. The blow stunned Jommy. His body slumped to the ground.

He felt his hands being tied, and then he was half lifted, half dragged for several feet. Finally he was lifted onto a creaking, rickety old wagon, and covered with filthy rags.

The wagon moved over the rough pavement of the back alley, and above the rattling of the wheels Jommy caught the old woman's snarl: "What a fool Granny would have been to let them catch you. Ten thousand reward! Bah! I'd never have gotten a cent. Granny knows the world. Once she was a famous actress, now she's a junk woman. They'd never pay a penny to an old rag and bones picker. Bah, upon the whole lot! Granny'll show them what can be done with a young slan. Granny'll make a huge fortune from the little devil!"

II

UGH, there was that nasty little boy again!

Kathleen Layton stiffened defensively, then relaxed where she stood at the five-hundred-foot battlements of the palace. It should be easy, it *was* easy after these long ten years as the only slan among so many hostile human beings, to face anything—even horrible eleven-year-old Davy Dinsmore.

She wouldn't turn. She wouldn't give him the faintest intimation that she knew he was coming along the broad, glass-enclosed promenade. Rigidly she held her mind away from his, maintain-

ing the barest safety contact, necessary to keep him from sneaking upon her by surprise. She must keep right on looking at the city, as if he weren't there.

The city sprawled in the near distance before her. In the farther distance the green plain seemed a darker green, and the gushing water of the river, that wound out of the city, seemed a deeper blue.

"Ya-a-a-ah! You better take a good look. It's the last time you'll see it. Ya-a-ah!"

The harsh, discordant, hateful voice rasped on her nerves like so much screeching, senseless noise. And then—in spite of herself—she jerked around to face him.

"Last time! What do you mean?"

Instantly she regretted her action. Even noticing this cruel creature was a victory for him. And yet—what could have made him say a thing like that? Incapable of imagination, he couldn't have thought of such words himself.

A brief impulse to investigate his mind seized her. She shuddered. No, entering that queer, unclean, twisted little mind would sicken her whole outlook for a month.

She turned her back on him. His jangling voice came again:

"Ya-a-ah, the last time! I said it, and I mean it. Tomorrow's your eleventh birthday, isn't it?"

Kathleen pretended she hadn't heard. But a tingling sense of disaster pierced her unconcern. There was too much gloating in his voice, too much certainty.

Davy Dinsmore snapped: "Think you're smart, don't you? Well, you won't feel so smart when they're killing you tomorrow. Maybe you don't know it yet, but mama says when they first brought you here, Mr. Kier Gray had to promise the cabinet he'd kill you on your eleventh birthday—and don't think they won't do it, either. They killed a slan woman the other day in the street, a Mrs. Cross. That shows! What do you think of that, smarty?"

"You're—crazy!" The words were forced from her lips. She hardly realized she had uttered them. Somehow, she did not doubt for a single instant that he spoke the truth. It fitted in with their mass hatred; it was so logical that she seemed, suddenly, always to have known it.

KATHLEEN shivered. She couldn't stand the presence of this—this wretched boy another second. Without a word she turned away and went down into the palace, down to the loneliness of her bedroom.

Sleep came slowly, though the hour was late. She must have dozed finally, for the harsh thought that came to her from the outside did queer, twisting things to the unreal dream she was having.

Kathleen stirred restlessly. The slan tendrils—thin strands of burnished gold that glinted in the semilight against the dark hair that crowned her finely molded, childish face—lifted clear of her hair and waved gently, as if a soft breeze had caught them. Gently, yet with a curious, tense insistence.

Abruptly the menacing thought those sensitive antennae drew out of the night-enveloped palace of Kier Gray penetrated to her brain. Kathleen awakened, quivering in every nerve and muscle.

The thought lingered in her mind, distinct, cruel, cold-bloodedly murderous, shocking the sleep from her.

Kathleen lay very still, and from the depths of her own mind there came full realization of what this meant. Somebody was not waiting until tomorrow; somebody doubted that her execution would take place. And he intended to present the council with an accomplished fact. There could be only one such person powerful enough to face any consequences: John Petty, the dreaded head of the Secret Service, the fanatic anti-slan; John Petty, who hated her. The assassin must be one of his henchmen.

With an effort, she quieted her quiv-

ering nerves and strained her mind out, out, to the utmost limit of her powers. The slow seconds dragged, and still she lay there, groping, searching for the rapacious and cunning brain whose thoughts had for a brief flash threatened her life.

The whisper of outside thoughts became a roar that beat into her with a throbbing fury that seared her shrinking brain like flame. It was months since she had explored that world of unsuspecting, uncontrolled minds. She had thought the memory of its horrors had not dimmed. Yet the reality was worse than the memory. Grimly, with an almost mature persistence, she held herself in that raging storm of mind vibration, fighting to isolate each individual pattern in turn.

Kathleen's mind pressed on, driven now by a mounting sense of urgency. Pictures flitted through her brain, a veritable kaleidoscope, brushed aside almost at the moment of entry as unwanted, unrelated to the grim, personal menace that had awakened her. There was the whole world of the palace with its intrigues, its countless personal tragedies, its selfish ambitions.

Abruptly, then, it came—the hard determination to kill *her!* Instantly it was gone again, like an elusive butterfly.

Then a stray picture appeared for a third time—and she had him.

Now she understood why his brain had evaded her so long. His thoughts were so carefully diffused, deliberately flashing to a thousand different subjects. He must have practised it, but even so, he wasn't a John Petty or a Kier Gray.

As soon as he entered the room she would—

Jommy knew Granny had betrayed him

THE thought broke off. Her mind received a shock as the truth showered in upon her.

The man *was* inside her bedroom, and was at this very instant creeping on his knees toward her bed.

A curious suspense held Kathleen. There was the knowledge that the slightest move would rustle the stiff sheets. He'd rush her then before she

could escape, pin her down under the blankets and have her at his merciless power.

She couldn't stir, she couldn't see; she could only feel the gathering excitement that pulsed through the mind of the assassin.

The flame of his murder purpose was a burning thing within him, fierce and powerful.

In that full revelation of his thoughts, Kathleen read the story of the attack. This man was the guard who had been posted outside her door. But he wasn't the usual guard. He was one of Petty's men.

She caught his plan of action as he rose up on the carpeted floor and bent over the bed. For the first time her eyes caught the dim flash of the knife as his hand drew back for the plunge.

Only one thing remained for her to do; only one thing she *could* do! With a swift, firm heave, she flung the blankets up over the head and shoulders of the startled man. Then she was sliding out of the bed—a shadow among the shadows of the room.

Behind her, the man uttered a faint cry as the blankets enveloped him. There was dismay in that low, surprised yell, and the first wild fear of what discovery would mean.

She caught his thoughts, heard his movements as he leaped the bed in a single violent jump and began flailing out with his arms, searching the darkness of the room.

She drew a deep breath. Her own excitement was submerging in the first formulations of contempt for the clumsy efforts of the assassin.

"You fool," she said, her child's voice hot with passionate disdain, yet immensely unchildlike in its stinging logic, "do you actually believe that you can catch a slan in the darkness?"

It was pitiful the way the man leaped in the direction from which her words came and beat with smashing fists in every direction. Pitiful, yet horrible! There was something unclean in his fear. It made Kathleen shiver where she stood in her bare feet at the opposite side of the room.

With a muttered curse the man stopped searching for her, and flung himself recklessly toward the door, where the light switch was located.

She knew at once what she must do, in spite of never having done it before. Soundlessly she slid along the wall, fingers searching. Then she had opened a paneled door, slipped through it, locked it behind her, and raced along a dim-lit private corridor to a large door at the end. It opened at her touch onto a large, luxuriously furnished office.

HALF frozen with sudden terror at the boldness of her action, Kathleen stood in the doorway, staring at the tall, powerful-looking man who sat at a desk writing by the light of a shaded desk lamp. Kier Gray did not look up immediately.

She knew after a moment that he was aware of her presence, and she took courage from his silence to observe him.

There was something magnificent about this ruler of men that held her admiration when the fear of his cold, ruthless personality lay like an icy weight inside her. His strong, handsome features formed an almost noble countenance in the thoughtful way it was bent over the letter he was writing.

As he wrote, she was able to follow the surface of his thought, but nothing else. For Kier Gray, she had found out long ago, shared with that most hateful of men, John Petty, the ability to think in her presence without deviation, in a manner that made mind-reading a practical impossibility. Only those surface thoughts were there, the words of the letter he was writing; and her excitement and impatience overrode any interest in his letter. She burst out:

"There's a man in my room. He tried to kill me."

Kier Gray looked up. His face held a harder expression now that it was turned full upon her. The noble qualities of the profile were lost in the determina-

tion and power of that lean, strong jaw. Kier Gray, master of men, stared at her coldly.

"An assassin, eh?" Kier Gray said. "Go on."

The story poured from Kathleen's lips in a trembling stream of words that covered everything that had happened from the time Davy Dinsmore had mocked at her on the battlements.

"So you think John Petty is behind it?" Gray asked.

"He's the only one who could have done it. The secret police control the men who guard me."

He nodded slowly, and she sensed the faintest tension in his mind. Yet his thoughts were deep and calm and slow.

"So it's come," he said softly. "John Petty's bid for supreme power. I almost feel sorry for the man, he is so blind to his own short-comings. No chief of secret police has ever held the confidence of a people. I am respected and feared; he is only feared. And he thinks that all-important.

Kier Gray's brown eyes looked gravely into Kathleen's. "He intended to kill you in advance of the date fixed by the council, because I could do nothing about it once it was done. And John Petty is right; since you are a ward of the State and under my protection, your death would lower my prestige with the council. Yet after you were slain, the council would only be impatient if I tried to force an issue over the death of a slan."

He was silent a moment, then he continued: "As you can see, Kathleen, it is a very subtle and dangerous situation. For John Petty, in order to discredit me with the council, has been very assiduous in spreading the story that I meant to keep you alive. Accordingly, and this is the point that will interest you"—for the first time a smile broke over the bleak lines of Kier Gray's face—"my prestige and position now depend upon my ability to keep you alive in spite of John Petty."

He smiled again. "Well, what do you think of our political situation?"

Kathleen's nostrils dilated with contempt. "He's a fool to go against you, that's what I think. And I'll help you all I can. I *can help*, with reading minds and things."

Kier Gray seemed to become more jovial every minute. He was still smiling—a broad smile that erased the harsh lines from his face.

"You know, Kathleen, we human beings must seem very queer at times to slans. For instance, the way we treat you. You know the reason for that, don't you?"

Kathleen shook her head. "No, Mr. Gray. I've read people's minds about it, and nobody seems to know why they hate us. There's something about a war between slans and human beings long ago. And then there are all those horrible stories too absurd to be anything but dreadful lies."

He said: "You've heard what slans do to human babies?"

"It's one of the silly lies," Kathleen snapped back contemptuously. "They're all dreadful lies."

He chuckled. "I can see you have heard about it. And this may shock you: Such things do happen to babies. What do you know about the mental outlook of an adult slan, whose intelligence is three hundred percent higher than a normal human being? Anyway, forget that for now. You and I are in a fight for our lives.

"We'll have our showdown right away. I'll get Petty here, and the council. They won't like being awakened from their beauty sleep, but to hell with them. You stay here. I want you to read their minds and tell me afterward what they thought during the investigation."

He pressed a button on his desk and said curtly into a little box-like instrument: "Tell the captain of my personal guard to come to my office."

III

IT WASN'T EASY for Kathleen Layton to sit there under the dazzling lights

that had been turned on. The men looked at her too often; and their eyes were cold and wary, their thoughts an icy mixture of impatience, cunning and mercilessness—and no pity for her anywhere. From each one of the eleven councilors came a chill fury of deadly hostility to her that brought the first wave of real fear she had felt.

There was too much hatred; it weighed upon her spirit, dimmed the very life that throbbed through her sensitive nerves. They wanted her dead. Appalled, she closed her eyes and turned her mind away, and tried to flatten herself back into her chair, as if by sheer will power she might make her body invisible.

But it didn't help. There was so much at stake, she dared not miss a single word or thought.

John Petty stood up abruptly and said: "I object to the presence of this slan at this meeting on the grounds that her innocent, childlike appearance might influence some of us to be merciful."

Kathleen stared at him wonderingly. The chief of the secret police was a heavily built man of medium height, and his face, that was rather corvine than aquiline, and the slightest degree too fleshy, showed not a trace of kindliness. Kathleen thought: Did he really believe *that?* These men merciful—for any reason!

She tried to read behind his words, but his mind was blurred—deliberately—as his dark, powerful face was expressionless. She caught the faintest overtone of irony; and realized with a jangling thrill that John Petty understood the situation perfectly, and this was his bid for power.

Kier Gray laughed dryly. "I don't think we have to worry about—about our kindly impulses overpowering our common sense."

"Quite right!" said Mardue, Minister of Transport. "A judge has to sit in the presence of the accused—especially if the judge knows in advance that the judgment is death." He chuckled softly, but his eyes were cruel.

"Then I want her out," snarled John Petty. "She's a slan, and by Heaven, I won't have a slan sitting in the same room with me!"

The answering surge of collective emotion to that popular appeal struck Kathleen like a physical blow. Voices rose up, raging:

"You're damned right!" "Put her out!" "Gray, you've got an almighty nerve waking us up like this!" "The former council settled the question eleven years ago. The sentence was death, wasn't it?"

The veritable babble of voices brought a grim smile to Petty's face. He glanced at Kier Gray. It was easy for Kathleen to see that Petty was trying to confuse the issue. But if the leader felt himself losing, it was not visible in his cold, impassive face; nor did a ripple of doubt flicker into his mind as he said:

"Gentlemen, you're under a misapprehension. Kathleen Layton, the slan, is not on trial here. She is here to give evidence against John Petty, and I can well understand his desire to have her out of the room."

John Petty's amazement then was a little overdone, Kathleen analyzed. His mind remained too calm, too icily alert, as his voice took on a bull-like roar:

"Well, of all the damned nerve! You've wakened all of us out of our sleep to pull a two-o'clock-in-the-morning surprise trial on me—on the evidence of a slan! I say you've got a nerve, Gray. Once for all, I think we should settle right now the juridical problem of whether a slan's word can be taken as evidence against a human being."

There it was again; the appeal to basic hatreds. Kathleen shivered before the waves of answering emotion that swept out from the other men. There was no choice for her here, no hope—nothing but certain death.

Kier Gray's voice was almost stolid as he said: "Petty, I think you should know

that you can't befuddle the issue."

His face hardened into a thin bleak line of tensed muscles. His voice took on a harsh rasp.

"I hope that everyone present comprehends what is happening. John Petty is making this bid to depose me; and no matter who wins between us, some of you are going to be dead before morning."

THEY weren't looking at Kathleen now, and she could see and feel and think for the first time with normal clarity.

Silence prevailed in that fine oak-paneled room while the thoughts of the men were engaged in gauging chances, analyzing the situation, tensing against a suddenly realized, deadly danger.

Kathleen grew abruptly aware of a break in the blur of thoughts—a clear, sharp, mental command to her: "Go to the chair in the corner, where they can't see you without twisting their heads. Quick!"

One glance Kathleen flung at Kier Gray. She saw his eyes almost glaring at her, so fierce was the blaze in them. And then she had slipped off her chair without a sound, obeying him.

The men didn't miss her, weren't even aware of her action. And Kathleen was conscious of a glow, the first wild leap of hope as she realized that Kier Gray, even in this moment of terrific strain, was coldly playing his cards, not missing a single trick. She heard him say to the councilors:

"Of course, there is no absolute necessity for executions, provided John Petty once and for all gets out of his head this insane desire to replace me."

Kier Gray went on, the faintest tinge of passion in his voice: "I say insane because, though it may seem that here is simply a squabble for power between two men, it imperils us all. The man who has supreme power represents stability and order; the man who displaces him, must, the moment he attains power, secure himself in his position. This mean executions, exiles, confiscations, imprisonment, torture—all, of course, applied against all those whom he distrusts—"

He was, Kathleen saw, appealing to their instincts of self-preservation, their fear of what change would involve. Her thoughts broke off as John Petty sprang to his feet, blazing with fury.

"I think," he burst out, "I have never heard such a mischievous statement. He has accused me of befuddling the issue. Gentlemen, have you realized that he has as yet produced no issue, no evidence? I can hardly find words to express my dismay—my utter consternation—at the thought of what this means. With the slan situation so desperate, how could he even suggest that one of us would precipitate disunion? I tell you, sirs, we cannot afford even the hint of a split at the present time. The public is alarmed over the monstrous worldwide activity of the slans against human babies. Their attempt to slanize the human race, with its resultant, horrible failures, is the greatest problem that has ever confronted a sorely tried government."

He turned to Kier Gray; and Kathleen felt a chill at the perfection of his acting, the apparent sincerity of the words that he spoke; "Kier, I wish I could forget what you have done; first, this baseless trial, then the threat that some of us will be dead before morning. It was the rankest intimidation. I suggest that you resign. You are no longer worthy of confidence."

Kier Gray said with a thin smile: "You see, gentlemen, we now come to the core of the problem. He wants my resignation."

A TALL, thin, youngish man, with a hawklike face, spoke up harshly: "I agree with Petty. Your actions, Gray, have shown that you no longer are a responsible person. Resign!"

"Resign!" cried another voice, and suddenly it sounded like a bedlam chorus: "Resign! Resign! Resign!"

To Kathleen, the shouts which followed, sounded like the knell of doom. A long moment passed before she realized that four of the seated ten had done all the shouting.

Her point of view cleared painfully. So that was it. By crying "Resign!" over and over, they had hoped to stampede the doubtful and the fearful, and, for the time being, had failed. Her attention flashed toward Kier Gray. Just looking at him brought a return of courage. For there he sat, a little straighter in his chair now, looking taller, bigger, stronger. On his face was a cold, ironical, confident smile.

"Isn't it odd," he said quietly, "how the four younger men rally to the support of young Mr. Petty? I hope that it is obvious to the older gentlemen present that there will be firing squads before morning because these young firebrands are transparently impatient of old fogies."

"Shoot 'em!" snarled Mardue, the oldest man present.

"The damned y o u n g upstarts!" snapped Harlihan, Airways Minister.

There was a muttering among the older men that would have been good to hear if Kathleen hadn't been so acutely aware of the sordid mind churnings that accompanied the low clamor. Hatred and ugly fear, and doubt and arrogance, selfishness and determination—all were there, a deadly tangle of intellectual squalor.

The faintest bit pale, John Petty faced that muttering; but Kier Gray leaped to his feet, eyes blazing, fists clenched: "Sit down, you unutterable fool! How dare you precipitate this crisis now, when we may have to change our entire slan policy? We're losing, do you hear? We haven't got a scientist to match the superscientists of the slan. What wouldn't I give to have one of them on our side! To have, say, a slan like Peter Cross, who was stupidly murdered three years ago because the police who caught him were tainted by the mentality of the mob."

IV

KIER GRAY'S face was dark with the passion he had put into his words. And all the time, Kathleen saw, his mind was calm, watchful, cautious. Master of demagoguery, ruler of men, when he spoke again, his voice seemed flat in comparison, his magnificent baritone clear and soft:

"John Petty has accused me of wanting to keep this child alive. I want you all to think back over the past few months. Has Petty at any time ever remarked to you, laughingly, perhaps, that I intended to keep her alive? I know that he has, because it came to my ears. But you see what he's been doing, subtly spreading the poison. Your political minds will tell you that he has forced me into this position: By killing her, I will seem to have yielded, and thereby will lose prestige.

"Therefore, I intend to issue a statement saying that Kathleen Layton will not be executed. In view of our lack of knowledge of slans, she will be kept alive as a study subject. I personally am determined to make the best of her continued presence by observing the development of a slan to maturity; I have already made a tremendous body of notes on the subject."

John Petty was on his feet. "Don't try to shout me down!" he snarled. "You've gone too far. Next thing you'll be handing over to the slans a continent on which they can develop these so-called super-inventions of which we have heard so much but have never seen. As for Kathleen Layton—by Heaven, you'll keep her alive over my dead body! The slan women are the most dangerous of all. They're the breeders, and they know their job, damn them!"

The words blurred for Kathleen. Into her mind, for the second time, had come an insistent question from Kier Gray: "How many present are for me unconditionally? Use your fingers to indicate."

One startled look she sent him, and

then her mind skewered into the welter of emotions and thoughts that flooded from the men.

Somehow she had believed the older men were all for the leader. And they weren't. In their minds was fear, a growing conviction that Kier Gray's days were numbered, and they had better play along with the young, strong group. All were against him now.

At last, utterly dismayed, she casually held two fingers up—her thumb and first finger—indicating zero.

She couldn't give him anything more, because his whole brain was concentrated on that zero, his eyes the faintest bit wide and alarmed. For the barest moment it seemed to her that anxiety flickered through his thoughts.

And then the impassivity closed over his mind and countenance. He sat in his chair, like a figure of stone, cold and grim and deadly.

She couldn't take her eyes off the leader now. The strained realization came that here was a cornered man, racking his brain, searching back into his experience for a technique to turn the imminent defeat into a crushing victory. She struggled desperately to penetrate that icy brain, but his iron grip on his thoughts, the very lucid, straightforward motion of his mind, remained an unshaken barrier between them.

Certain that he had won, John Petty snapped:

"I think we ought to take a vote on this matter now."

KIER GRAY began to laugh—a long, deep, cynical laugh. "So you'd like a vote on an issue! Let me put one more of my cards on the table. I have known of this rebellion for some time and have prepared for it."

"Bah!" snapped Petty. "You're bluffing. I've watched your every move. When we first organized this council we feared eventualities such as one man dispensing with the votes of the others, and the safeguards then set up are still in force. Each of us has a private army. My own guards are out there, patroling the corridor, and so are the guards of every member of the council, ready to rush at each other's throats when the word is given. We are quite prepared to give it and take our chance of being killed in the battle that results."

"Ah," said Kier Gray softly, "now we're out in the open."

There was a shuffling of feet among the men, a chilling spray of thoughts; and then, to Kathleen's dismay, Mardue cleared his throat and spoke.

"Really, Kier, you're making a mistake in regarding yourself as dictator," Mardue said. "You're only elected by the council. We have a perfect right to elect someone in your place—someone, perhaps, who will be more successful in organizing the extermination of the slan."

It was turn-coating with a vengeance. The rats were deserting the sinking ship and trying desperately now, Kathleen saw, to convince the new powers that their support was valuable.

In Hallihorn's brain, too, the wind of thought was blowing in a new direction: "Yes, yes. Your talk about making a deal with the slans is treason—pure treason!"

"Good for you, Hallihorn!" John Petty snarled, in triumph. "Well, at least it's pleasant to know that we're all agreed on one thing: That Kier Gray is through."

"Not at all," said Kier Gray mildly. "I disagree with that so violently that the eleven of you will face firing squads within ten minutes. I was undecided on such drastic action, but now there is absolutely no alternative and no going back, because I have just taken an irrevocable action. I have pressed a button advising the eleven officers in command of your guard, your most trusted advisors, and your successors, that the hour has come."

They stared at him stupidly, and there was a blur of thought that clambered into Kathleen's bewildered brain. It didn't make sense, what we was saying:

"You see, gentlemen, you failed to allow for a fatal flaw in human nature; the desire on the part of your underlings for power. The solution to such a situation as exists now was suggested to me one day when Mr. Petty's chief aid approached me with the offer that he would always be willing to replace Mr. Petty. I explored the matter further, with very satisfying results, and saw to it that the men were on the scene for Kathleen's eleventh birth—ah, here are the new councilors!"

THE door burst open, and eleven grim young men with drawn revolvers came in. What happened then happened too swiftly for thought. There was a great shout from John Petty: "Your guns!" And the wailing cry of one man, "I didn't bring one!" And then the crash of revolver shots filled the room with an echoing, re-echoing roar.

It was horrible to see the men on the floor, writhing, choking in their own blood. Through a blur, Kathleen saw one of the eleven councilors still standing, smoking gun in hand, and recognized John Petty. Abruptly, then, Kathleen's brain cleared, and she understood what had happened.

John Petty had fired first. The man who had thought to replace Petty was dead, a motionless figure on the floor. Then the other guards disarmed Petty. Grim and pale, the Chief of the Secret Police addressed Kier Gray.

"How about a deal," Petty said, "before they can get me? I'll play ball, naturally, now that you've turned the table so neatly."

"Shall we let him have it, sir?" asked the leader of the ten officers, a lean, dark man with an aquiline face, and a clipped baritone voice, whose name, Kathleen knew, was Jem Lorry. It was hard to read his mind because he, too, had a power of control over himself that defied penetration, but there was enough of his character in his surface thoughts to show him for what he was, a hard, ambitious man, utterly ruthless.

"No," Kier Gray replied thoughtfully, "John Petty will be useful. He'll have to agree that the other men were executed as a result of the investigations of his secret police disclosing secret arrangements with the slan. That will be the explanation—to the public. How's that?"

Jem Lorry came forward. "Good stuff, sir. Sounds logical."

Kier Gray said coldly: "Clear this carrion out, and then—we've got some planning to do. As for you, Kathleen, go to bed. You're in the way now."

As she hurried off, shaking now from intense reaction, Kathleen wondered: In the way? Did he just mean—in the way, just now? Or did he mean to have her slain, too?

After the ruthless murders she had just witnessed, she couldn't be sure of Kier Gray, of anything. It was a long, long time before sleep came to her weary brain and body.

V

FOR Jommy Cross there were long spells of utter darkness and mental blankness that merged finally into the living world again. He opened his eyes, conscious that he was still very weak.

He was lying in a squalid little room, staring up at a smeared, dirty ceiling, from which some of the plaster had fallen. The walls were an uneven gray, queerly splotched with age. The pane of the single window was cracked and discolored; the light that forced through it fell across the end of the iron bedstead in a dim pool and lay there as if exhausted from the effort.

There was enough strength in its wan brightness to reveal bedclothes that were ragged remnants of what had once been gray blankets. At one edge, straw stuck out from the old torn mattress.

Sick though he still was, he flung the foul blankets from him, and started to slip out of bed. A chain rattled menacingly, and there was sudden pain in his right ankle. He lay back, stunned and

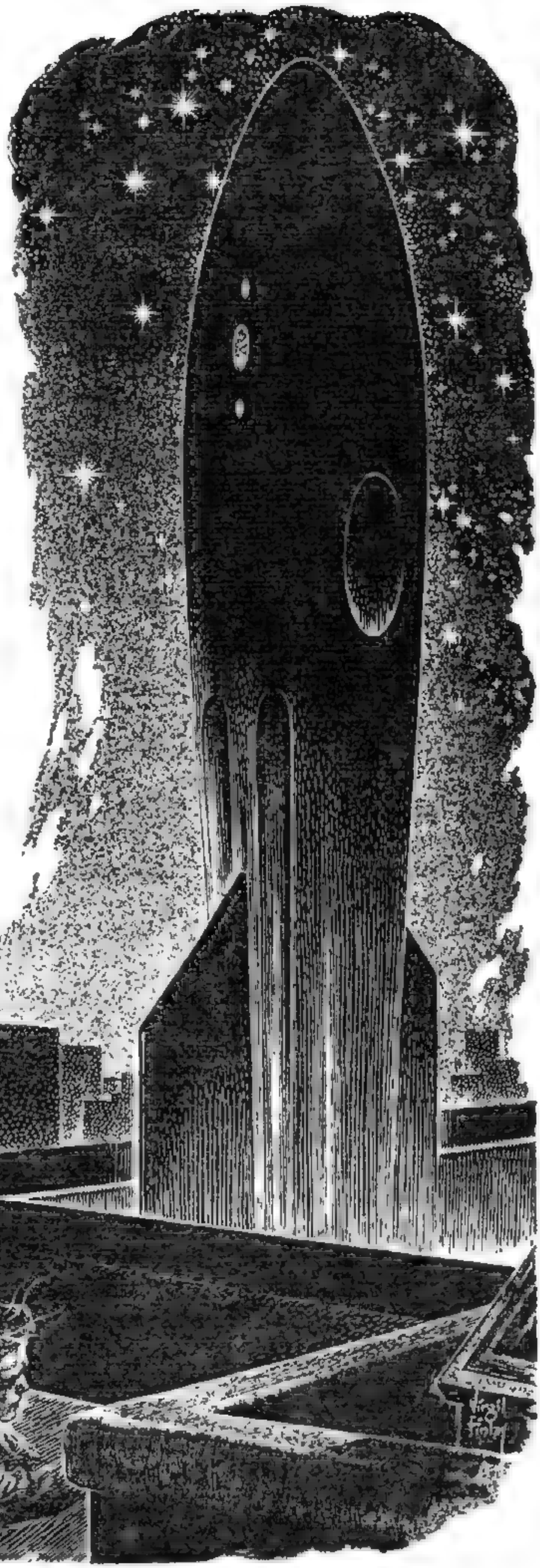
exhausted by his brief effort. He was chained to this loathsome bed!

Heavy footsteps aroused him from the stupor into which he had fallen. He opened his eyes to see a tall, gaunt woman in a formless gray dress standing at the door, her black eyes gleaming down at him like bright beads.

"Ah," she croaked. "Granny's new boarder has come out of his fever, and now we can get acquainted. That's good! That's good!"

She rubbed her dry hands together raspingly. "We're going to get along beautifully, aren't we? But you've got to earn your keep. No slackers can leech off Granny. No, sir. We'll have a heart-to-heart talk about that." She leered at him over clasped hands. "Yes, yes, a heart-to-heart talk."

Jommy stared up at the old woman in repelled fascination. As the thin, long, slightly stooped creature sank with a grunt onto the foot of the bed, he drew his legs up against his body, withdrawing as far from her as the chain would allow.



A dim torpedo-like shape leaped toward the star-filled sky

It struck him that he had never seen a face that more nearly expressed the malignant character behind the mask of old flesh. With rising disgust, he compared her thin, lined, egg-shaped head with the mind inside; and it was all there. Every twisted line in that wrecked face had its counterpart in the twisted brain.

His thought must have shone in his face, for she snarled with sudden malice: "Yes, yes, to look at Granny, you'd never think she was once a famous beauty. You'd never suspect that men once worshiped the white loveliness of her. But don't forget that this old hag saved your life. Never forget that, or Granny may turn your ungrateful hide over to the police. And how they'd love to have you. How they would love it! But Granny's kind to them as is kind to her and does as she wants."

Granny! Was there ever a term of affection more prostituted than this old woman calling herself Granny!

Shuddering, immeasurably weary now, Jommy withdrew from the unclean nightmare, the utter abomination that was Granny's mind. The old wretch leaned toward him, her eyes like gimlets drilling into his:

"It's true," she hissed, "that slans can read minds?"

"Yes," Jommy admitted. "And I can see what you're thinking, but it's no use."

She chuckled grimly. "Then you don't read all that's in old Granny's mind. Granny's no fool; Granny's smart; and she knows better than to think she can force a slan to stay and work for her. He has to be free for what she wants him to do. He's got to see that, being a slan, this will be the safest place for him until he grows up. Now, isn't that clever? Isn't Granny clever?"

Jommy sighed sleepily. "I can see what's in your mind, but I can't talk to you now. When we slans are sick—and that's not often—we just sleep and sleep. Now I've got to go back to sleep and get well."

The coal-black eyes grew wide. The corrupt mind recoiled, briefly accepting defeat in its main purpose of making immediate wealth from its prey. Greed yielded momentarily to violent curiosity. She shrilled in a hoarse whisper:

"Is it true that slans make monsters out of human beings?"

A red needle of fury poked through Jommy's brain. Weariness fell away from him. He sat up, exploding in rage.

"That's a lie! It's one of those horrible lies that human beings tell about us to make us seem inhuman, to make everybody hate us, kill us."

He sank back, exhausted, rage evaporating. "My mother and father were the dearest people alive," he said softly, "and they were terribly unhappy. They met on the street one day, saw in each other's minds that they were slans; until then they'd lived the loneliest of lives; and they never harmed anyone. It's the human beings who are the criminals. Dad didn't fight as hard as he could have when they cornered him and shot him in the back. He could have fought; he should have! Because he had the most terrible weapon the world has ever seen—so terrible he wouldn't even carry it with him for fear he might use it. When I'm fifteen I'm supposed to—"

He stopped, utterly appalled at his indiscretion. For an instant he felt so sick, so immeasurably weary, that his mind simply refused to hold the burden of his thought. He knew only that he had given away the greatest secret in slan history, and if this grasping old wretch turned him over to the police in his present weakened condition, all was lost.

Slowly he breathed easier. He saw that her mind hadn't really caught the enormous implication of his revelation. That she hadn't really heard him at the moment when he mentioned the weapon—for that rapacious brain had already been too long away from its main purpose. And now, like a vulture, it swooped down on prey it knew to be exhausted.

"Granny's glad to know that Jommy's such a nice boy. Poor, starving old Granny needs a young slan to make money for her and him. You won't mind working for tired old Granny, will you?" Her voice hardened. "Beggars can't be choosers, you know."

The knowledge that his secret was safe acted like a drug. His eyelids drooped. He said: "Really, I can't talk to you now. I know what you're trying to do and I know what you want, but it's dishonest and I won't do it."

"Don't be stupid," the old woman snapped angrily, on her subject at last. "Is it dishonest to rob people who would kill you on sight? Shall you and Granny eat crusts of bread when the world is so rich. Human beings and slans are at war. Bah on your honesty, that's what Granny says! How can a slan, hunted like a rat, talk of being honest?"

Jommy was silent, and not only because of his unutterable need for sleep. He had had thoughts like that himself. The old woman pounded on:

"Where will you go? What will you do? Will you live in the streets? What about winter? Where in all this world can a little slan boy go?"

Her voice sank, in a repulsive attempt at sympathy: "Your poor, dear mother would have wanted you to do what I'm asking. I've saved the paper to show you how they shot her down like a dog when she tried to escape. Would you like to see it?"

"No!" said Jommy, but his mind whirled with strange dizziness.

The harsh voice pressed on: "Don't you want to do everything you can against a world that's so cruel? Make them pay; make them regret what they've done! It's no sin to take things from people who are making war on you."

He was silent, his brain seething. There was truth in what Granny said. It was war. Hadn't they shot down his unresisting mother and father without mercy—in cold blood? Hadn't that mob hunted him, in order to murder him, too?

Jommy felt beaten. He snarled: "You're a rotten, miserable old scoundrel, and some day I'll kill you!"

"Then you'll stay until that 'some day!'" Granny cackled triumphantly. Her horrible, wrinkled hands rubbed together like two dry-scaled snakes crawling over each other raspingly. "And you'll do as Granny says, too, or she'll turn you over to the police—fast! Welcome to our little home, Jommy. Welcome. You'll be better the next time you waken, Granny hopes."

"Yes," Jommy said weakly. "I'll be better."

He slept. . . .

Three days later, Jommy followed the old woman through the kitchen toward the back door. The kitchen was an ugly, bare little room, and Jommy closed his eyes to shut out the view of dirt and untidiness. He thought: The old woman was right. This little shack would make an ideal hiding place for a little slan boy.

The thought fled as the door opened and he saw what lay beyond. He stopped short, stunned by the vista that opened up before him. Never in all the world had he expetced to see anything like *this*.

First was the ugly little yard, piled with old metal and junk of every description—a yard barren of grass or trees.

A small ramshackle barn tottered precariously at the farthest end of the yard. The blurred mind pictures of a horse came from inside. The horse itself was vaguely visible through the open door.

But Jommy's eyes flashed past the yard. His passing glance picked up the unpleasant details; that was all. His mind, his vision, reached beyond the fence, beyond that rickety barn.

Beyond there were trees, little bunches of them; and grass—a green, pleasant meadow that sloped toward a broad river, gleaming in the rays of the sun like shining fire. An incredible land of dreams began on the opposite shore, a

gemlike Eden, with sparkling fountains and its square mile on square mile of flowers and terraces and overwhelming beauty. And far beyond that he saw the palace.

Only part of the base of that tremendous, that incredible structure, reached up from the other side of the skyline. A thousand feet then it reared—and merged into a tower that soared another five hundred feet into the heavens. It sparkled there with all the colors of the rainbow, a translucent, shining, fantastic thing. Here in this glory of architectural triumph the slans had created their masterpiece, only to have it fall to the victors after the war of disaster.

VI

YES, it was too beautiful! It hurt Jommy's eyes, hurt his mind with the thoughts that it brought. To think that he had lived nine years in this city and had never before seen this glorious achievement of his race! It hurt Jommy to realize that the palace of the slans now belonged to Kier Gray and his ghoulish crew.

Once Jommy's mother had said: "Human beings will never know all the secrets of that building. There are mysteries there, forgotten rooms and passages, hidden wonders that even the slans no longer know about, except in a vague way. Kier Gray doesn't realize it, but all the weapons and machines the human beings have searched for so desperately are buried right in that building."

A harsh voice jarred his ears. Jommy tore his gaze reluctantly from the grandeur across the river and became aware of Granny. He saw she had hitched the old horse to her junk wagon.

"Quit your day-dreaming," she commanded. "And don't get any funny ideas into your head. The palace and palace grounds are not for slans. And now—get in under these blankets, and mind you keep still. There's a busybody policeman up the street who'd better not find out about you. We've got to hurry."

Jommy's eyes turned to the palace for one last lingering look. So that palace wasn't for slans! He felt a queer thrill. Some day he'd go over there to look for Kier Gray. And when that day came—The thought stopped as he realized he was shaking in every nerve from sheer, unadulterated rage and hatred against the men who had murdered his mother and father.

The rickety old cart traveled downtown. It rattled and shook over the uneven pavement of the back alleys until Jommy, half lying, half crouching in the back, felt as if his brains would shake out of his head. Twice he made a painful attempt to stand up, but each time the woman snarled at him.

"You stay down! Granny doesn't want anyone to see those good clothes of yours. You just keep covered up with that robe."

The tattered old robe stunk of old Bill, but at long last the junk wagon stopped.

"Get out," snapped Granny, "and go into that department store. You'll find big pockets I've sewn inside your coat. Just fill them with stuff so they won't bulge."

Dizzily, Jommy clambered down to the cement. He said to Granny: "I'll be back in about a half hour."

The dark, rapacious face bent toward him, the black eyes glittered. "Don't get caught, and use your common sense in what you take." The old wrinkled face broke into a hideous grin. "And don't worry if Granny isn't here when you come back. She's going over to the liquor store for some medicine. She can afford medicine now that she's got a young slan."

OUTSIDE fear came rushing into him as he breasted the throngs that washed in and out of the skyscraper department store; abnormal, exaggerated fear. He opened his mind wide, and caught the basis of that mass fear. Executions at the palace! John Petty.

the head of the secret police, had caught ten councilors making a deal with the slans, and killed them. The crowd was afraid of John Petty, they distrusted him. Thank Heaven Kier Gray was there, solid as a rock to protect the world from the slans—and from the sinister John Petty.

It was busy inside the store. There were more people. Their thoughts pounded at his brain, a mad chaos of them, as he threaded his way along the aisles of shining floor displays, under the gleaming whiteness of the ceiling lights. A gorgeous world of goods in enormous quantities swelled all around him—and taking what he wanted proved easier than he had expected.

He passed the end of the long, glittering jewelry department and helped himself to a pendant marked fifty-five dollars. Jommy turned away, brushing past a tall, good-looking man who whisked by without so much as a glance at him.

Jommy walked on for a few paces—and stopped. He experienced a shock he had never known before in his life stabbed through him. It was like a knife cutting into his brain, so sharp it was; and yet it was not unpleasant. Astonishment, joy, flashed through him as he turned and stared eagerly after the back of the retreating man.

The handsome, powerfully built stranger was a slan—a full-grown slan!

The thing was tremendous, incredibly important. His brain soared with sheer, wild eagerness, unlike anything he had ever known.

He began to walk rapidly after the man. His thought reached out, seeking swift contact with the other's brain—recoiled!

Jommy frowned. He could still see that the being was a slan, but his mind could not reach beyond the surface of the slan's mind. And that surface reflected no awareness of Jommy, not the faintest suggestion that he was conscious of any outside thoughts at all.

There was mystery here. It had been impossible a few day before to read beyond the surface of John Petty's mind. Yet there had never been any question of Petty being anything but a human being.

The conclusion was staggering. It meant—here was a slan who couldn't read minds; yet guarded his own brain from being read.

Guarded it from whom? From other slans? And what manner of a slan was it that couldn't read minds?

They were out in the street now. It would have been easy for Jommy to have caught up with the slan in a few moments. But instead of narrowing the gap that separated him from the slan, Jommy allowed it to widen, for the whole hypnotic education that his father had imprinted upon his young mind rose up and prevented precipitate action.

TWO BLOCKS from the store, the slan turned up a wide side street. Puzzled, Jommy followed him at a safe distance. One, two, three blocks they went; and then he was certain.

Quite incredibly, the slan was heading for the air center that, with all its buildings and factories and landing field, sprawled for a square mile at this part of the city. The thing was amazing. Why, people couldn't even get near an airplane without having to remove their hats to prove that they were minus slan tendrils.

The slan walked under a big, blazing sign: AIR CENTER, and vanished into the revolving door under the sign.

Almost sick with doubt, Jommy paused at the door. Was it possible that slans worked here in the center of the human world that hated them with almost unimaginable ferocity?

Utterly impossible! But—that slan!

He pushed through the door, and along the corridor of marble that stretched ahead of him, with countless doors leading off it. For the moment there was not a person in sight, but little thoughts trickled out to feed his growing amazement and delight.

The place swarmed with slans. There must be scores, *hundreds!*

Just ahead of him, a door opened, and two bareheaded young men came out and walked toward him. They were talking quietly to each other, and for a moment did not see him.

Jommy had time to catch their surface thoughts, the calm and magnificent confidence of them, the utter lack of fear. Two slans, in the very prime of maturity—and bareheaded! Bareheaded—and without tendrils.

For a moment it seemed to Jommy that his eyes must be playing him tricks. His gaze searched almost frantically for the golden strands of tendril that should have been there.

Tendrilless slans! So that was it! That explained why they couldn't read minds.

The men were only ten feet away when, simultaneously, they became aware of him. They stopped.

"Boy!" said one, "you'll have to get out. Children are not allowed here. Run along now."

Jommy drew a deep breath. It was wonderful, that by the simple removal of their telltale tendrils, they could live and work securely in the midst of their enemies!

With a sweeping, almost melodramatic gesture, he reached up to his cap, and removed it.

"It's all right," he began. "I'm—"

The words blurred on his lips, and sharp dismay stabbed through him. He watched the two men with fear-widened eyes. For after one uncontrolled moment of surprise, the mind shields of the two men closed tight, their smiles friendly.

One said, "Well, this is a surprise!"

And the other echoed: "A damned pleasant surprise. Welcome, kid!"

But Jommy was not listening. His whole mind was swaying from the shock of the thoughts that had exploded in the brains of the two men in that brief moment when they saw the glittering golden tendrils in his hair:

"God!" the first one had thought, "it's a damned snake!"

And from the other had come a thought utterly cold, utterly merciless: "Kill the damned thing!"

VII

AS FOR Jommy, when he caught the "kill him!" thoughts of the two slans, the devastating surprise of their coldly murderous enmity did not basically affect his actions or his brain.

He knew that to run back along the corridor, would be sheer suicide. His nine-year-old legs could never match the tireless endurance of the able-bodied slans.

There was only one thing to do; and he did it. With a boy's agility, he twisted to one side. There was a door there, one of the hundreds that lined the corridor.

Fortunately, it was unlocked. Before his battering rush, it opened lightly. He had a brief glimpse of a second, lighted corridor, empty of life, and then he was shutting the door. The latch and the lock clicked home.

The very next instant there was a violent thud as two adult bodies dashed themselves in a wild abandon against the locked barrier. But the door did not even tremble. For the moment Jommy was safe.

His mind reached for contact with the minds of the two slans. His exploring brain caught their overtones of grim desperation, an anxiety so terrible that it was like knives hacking at the surface of their thoughts.

"God Almighty!" one whispered. "Sound the secret alarm, quick! If the snakes find out we control Airways—"

Jommy wasted not another second. Every atom of curiosity regarding the bewildering hatred of the tendrilless slans was shelved. He ran at top speed, knowing exactly what he must do.

He plunged on unhesitatingly, but at any moment a door might open. So he slowed his headlong rush and tried several doors. The fourth door yielded to

pressure, and Jommy crossed the threshold with a sense of triumph. On the far side of the room was a tall, broad window.

It was but the work of a moment to push the window open and peer out. He could see what appeared to be a narrow driveway wedged between two sheer precipices of brick wall.

For an instant he hesitated. Then, like a human fly, he started up the brick wall. The climbing was simple enough; his enormously strong slan fingers searching with swift sureness for rough edges. With every upward step his confidence surged stronger within him. There were miles of roof above; and, if he remembered rightly, the airport buildings connected on every side with other buildings. What chance had slans who could not read minds against a slan who could avoid their every trap?

The thirtieth, and top, story! With a sigh of relief, Jommy pulled himself erect and started along the flat roof. It was almost dark now, but he could see the top of a neighboring building. A leap of two yards at most, an easy jump. With a loud *clang!* the clock in a nearby tower began to intone the hour. Ten o'clock! On the stroke, a low, grinding noise struck Jommy's ears. Suddenly, in the shadowy center of that expanse of roof opposite him yawned a wide, black hole. Startled, he flung himself flat, holding his breath.

And from that dark hole, a dim torpedo-like shape leaped into the star-filled sky. Faster, faster it went. Then, at the uttermost limit of vision, a tiny, blazing light sprang from its rear. It flickered there for a moment—then was gone, like a star snuffed out.

TREMBLING, Jommy lay very still. A spaceship. By all the heavens, a spaceship! Had these tendrilless slans realized the dream of the ages—to operate flights to the planets? If so, how had they kept it secret from human beings? And what were the true slans doing?

The dull, scraping noise reached him again. Cautiously he crept to the edge of the roof and peered across. He could vaguely see the two great metal sheets slide together and the roof was whole again.

For a moment longer Jommy waited, then he bunched his muscles and sprang. Only one thought was in his mind now. To get back to Granny quickly and by as devious a way as possible. Back alleys, side streets, must be his route. For this ease of escape from *slans* suddenly seemed enormously suspicious. Unless, of course, they didn't dare set up safeguards for fear of betraying their secret to humans.

Whatever the reason, it was obvious that he still needed desperately the security of Granny's little shack. He had not the faintest desire to tackle a problem so complicated and dangerous as the slan-human-tendrilless slan triangle, until he was full grown.

Yes, back to Granny, and by way of the store to get some peace offerings for the old wretch, now that he was certain to be late. And he'd have to hurry, too. The store would close at eleven.

At the store, Jommy did not venture near the jewelry counter. There were other richly laden counters, and he swiftly skimmed the cream of their less bulky merchandise.

Laden at last with stolen goods, he headed cautiously for the nearest exit, then stopped as a man, a middle-aged, paunchy person, walked by thoughtfully. The man was the chief accountant of the department store; and he was thinking of the four hundred thousand dollars that would be in the safe overnight. In his mind also was the combination of the safe.

Jommy hurried on, but he was disgusted with his lack of foresight. Why steal goods, which would have to be sold; it was not to be compared to the simple business of taking all the money he wanted.

Granny was still where he had left her, but greatly agitated.

"Quick," she breathed hoarsely, "get in under the blankets. A policeman was just here warning Granny to move on."

It must have been at least a mile farther on that she stopped the car, and tore the blanket off Jommy with a snarl of rage.

"You ungrateful wretch, where have you been?"

Jommy wasted no words. His contempt for this miserable creature was too profound for him to bandy words. He shivered as he watched the gloating eagerness with which she snatched at the treasures he dumped into her lap.

"At least two hundred dollars for old Granny!" she rasped joyously. "Old Finn will give Granny that much. Oh, but Granny's smart, catching a young slan. He'll make not ten thousand but twenty thousand a year for her. And to think they offered only ten thousand reward! It should have been a million."

"I can do even better than that," Jommy volunteered. It seemed as good a time as any to tell her about the store safe, and that there was no need for more shop-lifting. "There's about four thousand in the safe," he finished. "I can get it tonight. I know the combination. I'll climb up the back where it's dark, to one of the windows, cut a hole in it . . . You've got a glass cutter somewhere?"

"Granny can get one!" the old woman breathed ecstatically. She rocked with joy. "Oh, oh, Granny's glad. But Granny can see now why human beings shoot slans. They're too dangerous. Why, they could steal the world!"

JOMMY saw that Granny's mind had jumped back to the money in the store.

"Only four thousand dollars!" she said sharply. "Why, they must make hundreds of thousands every day—millions!"

"They don't keep it all in the store," lied Jommy; and, to his relief the old woman accepted the explanation.

He thought about the lie, as the cart rattled on. He had uttered it in the first place almost automatically. Now he saw that it was self-protection. If he made this wretched old woman too rich, she would soon begin to think of betraying him.

It was absolutely imperative that, during the next six years he live in the security of Granny's shack. Among the known imponderables overhanging the precious six years separating him from his father's mighty science, this gaunt, repulsive cerature loomed as the most dangerous uncertainty factor.

VIII

THIS was Jommy's fifteenth birthday! Fleecy-white clouds misted the cheerful spring afternoon sunshine outside. And inside—Jommy Cross glanced at his watch and felt a thrill-tingle as the message of the hands read two o'clock. His six feet of muscles tensed, nerves flamed with the sudden tremendous knowledge that this was the day, this the hour!

The six years had been an almost intolerable stretch of time. Yet in those years he had molded himself skillfully to his will, and the one overwhelming purpose for which he had been preparing himself.

His chief endeavor had been a pursuit of higher education. He had followed learned men around the streets, picking their minds of knowledge. He had lain on campus grounds, precariously hidden, mentally following lectures. Books he had in plenty, but books were not enough. They had to be interpreted, explained.

There was mathematics, physics, chemistry, astronomy—all the sciences! His desire knew no bounds; it was the supply itself that gave out. Human beings could only offer a limited supply during those six years when his voracious intelligence had developed so enormously.

From a cautious distance, he had watched the tendrilless slans. Nightly,

their spaceships leaped into the sky; and the service was maintained on precision time. Every night at 10:00, the torpedolike shape jumped up, up; and every night at 2:30, another shark-shaped monster plunged down from space, silent and dark, and dropped like a ghost into the top of the same building.

Only twice during those years did the traffic suspend, each time for a month, and each time when Mars, following her eccentric orbit, teetered on the farthest side of the Sun.

Of the basic mysteries of the tendrilless slans, he had learned nothing. To pass the time he indulged in great bursts of physical activity. First of all, he had to have a secret way of escape—secret from Granny as well as the world; and second, he couldn't possibly live in this horrible shack as it was. It took months to dig hundreds of yards of tunnel, months too to tear down the rotting, wretched internal structure of the four-roomed shack. He had rebuilt it by little sections, filling the destroyed space with fine, paneled walls, shining ceilings and plastic floors.

He had sneaked the new furniture in at night, past the still junk-laden yard, and the unchanged, unpainted exterior. But that required nearly a year in itself—because of Granny.

For years she had been forced to maintain herself at the highest pitch of alertness in order to make the barest of livings. And then, suddenly, that carefully built-up efficiency was no longer needed. Her morale simply collapsed like a stuffed scarecrow. Where before an occasional binge had sufficed, now she couldn't stay sober. For weeks on end, she lay in a drunken stupor surrounded by the gleaming bottles that unlimited income made possible.

Two o'clock plus an hour to get downtown. Silently, Jommy put on the shoes he had taken off when he lay down after luncheon. If he could slip out without the old woman hearing him, at least he would avoid her tiresome curses.

Briefly, he let his mind sink into hers —and, briefly, without the slightest sense of disgust—sampled the stream of her thought. The old fool was still drinking. He learned what she was thinking:

"—Got to get rid of that slan. He's dangerous for Granny now that she's got money. Mustn't let him suspect . . . keep it out of my mind so . . ."

Jommy Cross smiled mirthlessly. It was not the first time he had caught treacherous idea from her brain. With sudden purposefulness he finished tying the shoelace, stood up and left the shack.

On the bus he thought: "I've got to watch her; and as soon as possible leave her. Nobody who thinks in probabilities could entrust anything valuable to *that*."

EVEN downtown, the streets were amazingly deserted. Jommy Cross climbed off the bus, conscious of the abnormal silence and the absence of life and movement.

He stood uncertainly at the curb, all thought of Granny draining from him. He opened his mind wide.

Uneasy alarm crept into Jommy Cross. He explored the buildings around him, but no clamor of minds came from them; nothing whatever.

What could be the matter?

The clatter of an engine burst abruptly from a side street. Two blocks away a tractor emerged, pulling a tremendous gun that pointed menacingly into the sky. The tractor chuttered to the center of the street, unhooked from the gun, and bellowed off into the side street from which it had come.

Men swarmed around the gun, preparing it; and then stood by, looking up at the sky, waiting tensely.

Jommy Cross wanted to walk closer but he didn't dare. The sense of being in an exposed and dangerous position grew into a sick conviction within him. Any minute a military or police car might roll up, and its occupants ask him what the devil he was doing in the street. He might be arrested, or told to take off his cap and show his hair, re-

vealing the golden threads that were his tendrils.

Something big was definitely up, and the safest place for him was the catacombs.

He started hurriedly toward the catacomb entrance that had been his goal ever since leaving the house. He was turning into a side street when the loudspeaker at the corner clattered into life: a man's voice roared hoarsely:

"Final warning—get off the street! Get out of sight. The mysterious airship of the slan is now approaching the city at terrific speed. Interference has been set up on all radio waves, to prevent any of the slan lies from being broadcast. Get off the streets! Here comes the ship!"

Jommy froze. There was a silver flash in the sky; and then a long, winged torpedo of glittering metal hurtled by straight above. He heard a staccato roar from the gun down the street; and the echo of other guns. And then the ship was a distant sparkling point, heading toward the palace.

Hastily, he turned and walked down the long flight of stairs that led to the public washroom. The place was as empty and silent as the streets above. It was a simple matter for Jommy who had passed through so many locked doors, to pick the lock of the steel-barred door leading to the catacombs.

He was conscious of excitement as he stared through the bars of the door. There was a vague foreground of cement beyond, then a blur of darkness that meant more stairs.

He opened the door, darted inside, and down the long reach of dank, dark steps at top speed.

Somewhere ahead, a bell began ringing monotonously, set off by the photo-electric cells whose barrier Jommy had crossed on entering the door—a protection set up scores of years ago against slans and other interlopers.

The bell was just ahead now; and still there was no mind stirring in the dim corridor that yawned before him. Apparently none of the men working or on guard in the catacombs, was within hearing distance.

He saw the bell, high up on the wall, a faintly glimmering piece of metal, *brring* away madly. The wall was smooth as glass, impossible to climb, the bell more than twelve feet from the floor, above his reach.

The bell was still ringing, as he rounded a bend in the corridor. He heard it grow fainter and fainter, fading into the distance behind him. But even after the sound was gone, the ghost of it still went on ringing in his mind, an insistent warning of danger.

QUEERLY, the sense of a warning buzz in his brain grew stronger. He realized there was another bell ahead, clanging as vociferously as the first one. That meant—he felt appalled—it meant a long line of such bells, sending out their alarms. Somewhere in that vast network of tunnels there must be ears to hear them, men stiffening and looking at each other with narrowed eyes.

Jommy Cross hurried on. He had no conscious knowledge of his route. He knew only that his father had hypnotized a picture of it into his mind, and that he need but follow the promptings of his subconscious.

It came abruptly, a sharp mental command: "To the right!"

He took the narrower of the two forks—and came at last to the hiding place.

It was all simple enough, a cleverly loosened slab in the marble wall that slid out under the pressure of his strength, revealing a dark space beyond. He reached in; his groping fingers touched a metal box. He pulled it to him.

He was shaking now, his fingers trembling violently. For a moment, he stood very still, fighting for self-control. It seemed to Jommy that this might be a cosmic moment in the history of slans, this moment when the work of a long dead father was passed

on to a fifteen-year-old boy who had waited so many dreary thousands of minutes and hours and days for this second to come.

The nostalgia fled from him abruptly as a mist of outside thought whispered into his mind. "Damn that bell!" somebody was thinking. "It's probably only someone who ran down when the slan ship came, trying to get away from expected bombs. Let's head toward the first bell, and keep our guns ready. Never know what it might be, with so many slans in the world these days—the dirty skunks.

Frantically, Jommy examined the metal box for the secret of how to open it. His hypnotic command was to take out the contents, and put the empty box back in the hole and his whole body was aflame with the need for swiftness. There seemed to be no lock, no catch, nothing. Hurry, hurry! In a few minutes the approaching guards would appear! He could hear them plainly now, three pairs of them, clumping toward him.

In a frenzy, Jommy Cross tore at the cover of the box, his muscles tensed for a terrible effort. He nearly lost balance, so easily did the unfastened cover lift up.

He found himself staring down at a queer, thick rod of metal that lay on top of a pile of papers. It struck him that he felt no surprise at it being there. There was intead, a faint relief at discovering intact something he had *known* was there. Obviously, more of his father's hypnotism.

The metal rod was a bulbous thing about two inches wide at the center but narrowing down at the ends. One of the ends was roughened, unmistabably meant to give the hand a good grip. There was a little button at the foot of the bulb part, convenient for the thumb to press it.

The whole instrument glowed ever so faintly with a light of its own. That diffused light was just bright enough for him to read on the sheet of paper:

This is the weapon. Use it only in case of absolute necessity!

For a moment, Jommy Cross was so intent that he didn't realize the men were upon him. A flashlight glared.

"What the—" one of the men roared. "Hands up, you!"

It was his first real danger in six long years. Then he was reaching for the weapon in the box before him and, apparently without haste, he pressed the button.

If any of the men fired, the action was lost in the roar of white flame that flashed with inconceivable violence from the mouth of the tube of force. One moment, the men were alive—threatening him; the next they were gone, snuffed out by that burst of blinding fire.

JOMMY looked down at his hand. It was shaking. There was a cold sickness in him at the way he had smashed three lives out of existence. Slowly his eyes recovered from the fiery dazzlement.

Now the corridor was empty. Not a bone, not a piece of flesh or clothing remained. Part of the floor was hollowed out, where that scorching incandescence had seared a concavity. But the slight, smooth depression it made would never be noticed.

He forced himself to stop trembling. Slowly the sickish feeling crept out of him. There was no use feeling badly. Killing was a tough business, but these men would have dealt death to him without compunction.

Jommy Cross frowned, beginning to feel alarm. There was no time to waste. He had to get out of here, and quickly! He slipped the gun into his coat pocket, swiftly caught up the papers in the box, and jammed them into his pockets. Tossing the now empty, useless box back into place, he slid the stone into the hole.

He raced down the corridor, back the way he had come, up the steps—and on through the washroom to the street.

Amazement surged through Jommy Cross as he reached pavement level. The city was alive with people. Swarming crowds of them pressed along the sidewalks and on the thoroughfares. Police whistles shrilled hysterically, loud speakers blared, but nothing could stem the wild, excited anarchism of the mob. All transport was at a standstill. Sweating, cursing drivers left their cars standing in the middle of the street, and joined listeners before the chattering street radios, that kept up a machine-gun barrage:

"Nothing is known for certain. No one knows exactly whether the slan ship landed at the palace or dropped a message and then disappeared. No one saw it land; no one saw it disappear. It is possible that it was shot down. Then again it is possible that at this moment the slans are in conference with Kier Gray at the palace. The only definite news is that the plane has disappeared!"

Jommy Cross climbed aboard a bus and headed for home. Darkness was settling over the hot spring day. A tower clock showed seventeen minutes past seven.

He approached the little junk-laden yard with his usual caution. His mind reached inside the deceptive, tumbled-down looking cottage, and touched Granny's mind.

He sighed. Still drunk! How the devil did that wrecked caricature of a body stand it? He pushed open the door, then stopped short!

His mind was receiving Granny's thought. The old woman had heard the door open and the sound had jogged her mind briefly:

"Mustn't let him know I phoned the police. Keep it out of my mind . . . can't have a slan around . . . dangerous to have a slan . . . police'll have the streets barred . . ."

IX

WITH flashing eyes, Kathleen Layton clenched her fists. Every muscle and nerve in her slim, young body quivered in repulsion at the vague, crude overtones of thought that beat at her from the man approaching her. To escape them she turned toward the marble parapet, where she stood staring out at the city which was wrapped in the soft mists of the humid, hot spring afternoon.

The mists shifted in ever-changing design, became like white fleecy clouds that half hid buildings, then changed into a haze that held locked within its flimsy texture the faintest tinge of sky-blue.

She kept her gaze and face averted from this man, the most powerful councilor on the cabinet of Kier Gray.

"You seem to be in a generous mood," Jem Lorry's voice, not unpleasant, came from behind her. "Apparently it was lucky I came up."

"Oh, I don't know," Kathleen replied coldly. "From the fire into the frying pan is hardly a change for me."

"H-m-m!" Jem Lorry came up beside her and she caught a glimpse of his strong, almost unbeautifully straight jaw line, as he leaned on the railing.

He stood for a moment silent. The years had made him a master of evading her special powers of mind reading. When finally he spoke, his voice was changed. It held a steel-hard quality.

"No doubt your outlook on these matters will change after you become my mistress," Lorry said.

"That will be never!" snapped Kathleen. "I don't like human beings; I don't like you."

"Your objections are no concern," the young man said coldly. "The only problem is, how can I take possession of you without subjecting myself to the accusation that I am in secret alliance with the slans."

There was an icy certainty about this brilliant young man that sent a cold shudder through Kathleen. "You're mistaken," she said firmly. "Kier Gray is my protector. Even you don't dare go against him."

Jem Lorry pondered that. Finally: "Your protector, yes. But he has no morals on the matter of a woman's virtue. I don't think he'll object if you become my mistress. He's become quite anti-slan these last few years. He and John Petty are closer on the subject now than they ever were. Funny!"

He mused on that for a moment; then: "But don't worry, I'll find an excuse. I—"

A roar from a radio loudspeaker, cut off Lorry's voice: "General warning! A slan airship was seen a few minutes ago, crossing the Rocky Mountains headed eastward. People are ordered to go home immediately. The ship will be here in one hour, and the streets are needed for military purposes."

The speaker clicked off; and Jem Lorry turned to Kathleen, a cold, sneering smile on his handsome face.

"Don't let that arouse any false hopes of rescue. One ship cannot carry important armaments, no matter what they are. It's probably an attempt to open negotiations."

There it was again—the cool certainty of the man. A queer hopelessness swept over Kathleen.

AN HOUR later, Kathleen stood beside Jem Lorry as the silver ship slanted toward the palace. Closer it came, traveling slowly now. Kathleen's mind reached out, trying to touch the powerful brains that must be there locked within the ship.

Lower the ship came. Suddenly, a metallic capsule dropped from the ship. It fell down, down—and struck the garden path, where it glinted like a dazzling jewel in the afternoon Sun.

She looked up; and the ship was gone. No, there it was. Briefly, she saw a silvery brilliance in the remote heights almost straight above the palace. It twinkled for a moment like an incredibly brilliant star—and disappeared.

Kathleen grew aware of Jem Lorry again. He exulted:

"Whatever else this means, it'll give me an opportunity to present an argument that will enable me to take you to my apartments this very night. There'll be a Council meeting immediately, I imagine."

Kathleen drew a deep breath. The time had come to fight with every weapon at her command. She said with dignity, her head flung back, her eyes flashing:

"I shall ask to be present at the Council meeting on the grounds that I was in mental communication with the captain of the slans aboard the airship." She finished the lie calmly: "I can clarify certain things in the message that will be found in the capsule."

She thought desperately: Somehow she'd read in their minds what the message was; and from that she could build up a reasonable story of what the slan leader had told her.

But an hour later, a sickish conviction of defeat came to Kathleen. There were only seven councilors present, including Kier Gray. She stared at them one by one, reading as much of their minds as she could; and there was no help for her.

The four younger men were personal friends of Jem Lorry. The sixth man, John Petty, gave her one brief glance of icy hostility, then turned away indifferently.

Her gaze fastened finally on Kier Gray. A little, anxious tremor of surprise whipped along her nerves, as she saw that he was staring at her with a sneer on his lips.

"So you were in mental communication with the slan leader, were you?" he said to Kathleen, and laughed harshly. "Well, we'll let that pass for the moment."

There was so much hostility in his attitude, that Kathleen felt an icy chill. Kier Gray went on, addressing the others:

"It's unfortunate that five councilors should be in the far corners of the world. However, we cannot postpone discussion on a problem as urgent as this one."

Kier Gray picked up a sheet of paper. "Here is the gist of the contents of the metal capsule dropped by the slan ship: They claim that there are a million slans organized throughout the world, but wish to end hostilities. They offer us peace with honor, the only basis of negotiation to be that slans must hereafter have the legal right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Kier Gray laid the paper back on his desk, coldly flicked his gaze from face to face, and said in flat, harsh voice:

"I am absolutely against any compromise whatever. I used to think that something could be done, but no longer! Every slan out there"—he waved his hand significantly to cover half the globe—"must be exterminated."

THE ROOM, with its subdued lights and paneled walls seemed suddenly strangely dim to Kathleen. With a terrible shock she realized that this man was as completely remorseless in his outlook as John Petty. His reason for keeping her alive must be exactly as he had said: for study purposes. For her he had no feeling of compassion or pity. This was the ruler of men whom she had admired, almost worshiped for years! This was her protector!

Kier Gray's eyes turned toward her. His lips curled in sarcastic mirth as he said:

"And now, let us hear the so-called message you received in your—er—mental communication with the slan commander."

Kathleen looked at him desperately. He didn't believe a word of her claim. She knew she was confronted by the mercilessly logical brain of this man. She needed time.

"I—" she began. "It was—"

She suddenly realized Jem Lorry was on his feet, his face dark and frowning. "Kier," he said with deliberate slowness, "that was pretty sharp tactics, rejecting the slans' offer, without giving the Council a chance to discuss it. In view of your action, I am left no alternative but to state, I am in favor of accepting this offer. My main qualification is this: the slans must agree to be assimilated into the human race. To that end, slans cannot marry each other, but they must always marry human beings."

Kier Gray stared at him thoughtfully, but without hostility: "What makes you think there can be children from a slan-human mating?"

"That's something I'm going to find out," said Jem Lorry. Kathleen leaned forward, holding her breath. "I've decided to take Kathleen, here, as my mistress, and we shall see what we shall see. Nobody objects, I hope." He paused, studying the faces around him.

The younger men shrugged. Kathleen didn't need to read their minds to see that they hadn't the slightest objection. Kier Gray seemed lost in thought, as if he hadn't heard either.

With a gasp she parted her lips to speak. Then shut them. Suppose that intermarriage was the only solution to the slan problem? Suppose the Council accepted Jem Lorry's solution! Dare she defend herself from him, if there was the slightest possibility of those other slans out there agreeing to the plan, and thus ending four hundred years of unutterable misery and murder?

Slowly, hopelessly, she sank back into her chair, vaguely conscious of the irony of her position. She had come to the Council chamber to fight for herself. Now she didn't dare utter a word. Kier Gray was speaking again:

"There is nothing new in this solution offered by Jem. Samuel Lann, originator of the slan race, was intrigued by the possible result of such a mating and persuaded one of his granddaughters to marry a human being. No children were born of the union."

"I've got to prove that for myself!" said Jem Lorry doggedly. "This thing is too big to depend on one mating."

"There was more than one," Kier Gray said mildly.

X

COLD chills ran through Kathleen as she realized that Jem Lorry had won his point. Tonight he would send soldiers for her and no one could say afterward that there had been any disagreement in the Council. Their silence was consent.

For several minutes she was conscious only of a blur of voices. Finally, a phrase caught her mind; with an effort she turned her attention back to the men. The phrase: "—could exterminate them that way."

It was an electric instant before she grasped how far they had gone from the original plan during those few minutes.

"Let us clarify this situation," said Kier Gray briskly. "John Petty's idea of using some apparent agreement with the slans for exterminating them seems to have struck a responsive chord.

"The schemes are, briefly, as follows: Number one: To allow them to intermingle with human beings until everyone has been thoroughly identified, then clamp down, catch most of them by surprise and track the others down within a short time.

"Plan number two: Force all slans to settle on an island, say Hawaii, and once we've got them there, surround the place with battleships and planes, and annihilate them.

"Plan number three: Let the police fingerprint and photograph them all. Then when they're listed, blot them out."

The cold voice hammered on, but somehow the whole scene lacked reality. They couldn't be sitting there icily discussing betrayal and murder on such a vast scale—seven men deciding for all the human race on a matter of more than life and death! The blackest of black double-crosses!

"What fools you are," Kathleen lashed out. "Do you imagine for one minute that slans would be taken in by your silly schemes? Slans can read minds. Besides the whole thing is so transparent and ridiculous, that I wonder how I could ever have thought any of you intelligent and clever!"

They turned to stare at her silently, coldly. A faint, amused smile crinkled the lips of Kier Gray.

"Just a minute," said John Petty; and there was so much satisfaction in his voice, such an exultant ring that Kathleen jerked toward him with a start. "Our main danger is not from ourselves but from the fact that this slan girl has overheard our plans. She has said that she was in mental communication with the commander of the slans on board the ship which approached the palace. In other words, they now know she is here. Naturally, she must be killed at once."

Dismay burned through Kathleen. The logic of the chief of police's argument could not be gainsaid. She saw the gathering realization of it in the minds of the men. By trying so desperately to escape the unwelcome attentions of Jem Lorry, she had walked blindly into a trap that could only end in death.

Jem Lorry's manner showed his dismay. It was a dark, stunning surprise that made him suddenly, harshly, exclaim to Kathleen:

"You damned little fool!"

With that, he started to chew on his lower lip, and sank back in his chair, staring moodily at the floor.

KATHLEEN was dazed. She stared for a long, dizzy moment at Kier Gray before she even saw him.

With a rising sense of horror she watched the startled frown that creased Kier Gray's forehead, the unconcealed, thunderstruck expression in his eyes. His very dismay showed that he had no answer, no solution to the problem that had dropped into the room like a bombshell. Slowly his expression changed to impassivity. Then a sudden light glowed in his eyes. But she felt no hope until he said:

"Death would perhaps be the neces-

sary solution if it were true that she was in communication with a slan aboard that ship. Fortunately for her, she was telling a lie. There were no slans on the plane. The ship was robot-propelled."

"All that is unimportant," John Petty snapped impatiently. "What counts is that this slan has been here in the room, has heard our plan to annihilate her people. Since she will do her best to inform other slans of what we contemplate, she must be killed."

Kier Gray stood up slowly. The face he bent toward John Petty was grim and dangerous; his voice, when he spoke held a metallic note of exasperation: "I have told you, sir, that I am making a sociological study of this slan, and I will thank you to refrain from further attempts to execute her." His voice became edged with sarcasm. "I hope I shall be permitted the privilege of keeping one slan alive for scientific purposes."

For the first time in her seventeen years, it struck Kathleen that there was a limit to the nervous tension that a slan could endure. Abruptly, she grew aware of a thought inside her brain, a sharp, lashing thought from Kier Gray:

"You little fool! How did you get yourself into this mess?"

SHE LOOKED at him then, miserably. He was leaning back in his chair, eyes half closed, lips drawn tight. He said finally:

"All this would be very well if such matings needed testing," Kier Gray said to Lorry. "They don't. Case histories of more than a hundred slan-human attempts to reproduce children are available in the file library under the heading, 'Abnormal Marriages.'"

"The reasons for the sterility are difficult to define because men and slans do not appear to differ from each other to any marked degree. The amazingly tough musculature of the slan is due, not to a new type of muscle, but to a speeding up of the electro-explosions that actuate the muscles. There is also an increase in the number of nerves to every part of the body, making it tremendously more powerful and sensitive.

"The two hearts are not really two hearts, but a combination, each section of which can operate independent of the other. Nor are the two together very much larger than the one original. They're simply finer pumps.

"Again, the tendrils that send and receive thoughts are growths from formerly little-known formations at the top of the brain, which, obviously, must have been the source of all the vague mental telepathy known to earlier human beings and is still practised by people everywhere.

"So you see that what Samuel Lann did with his mutation machine to his wife, who bore him the first three slan babies—one boy and two girls—six hundred and thirty years ago, has not added anything new to the human body, but change or mutate what already existed."

It seemed to Kathleen that he was talking to gain time. In that one brief mental flash from him, there had been overtones of a complete understanding of the situation. He must know that no amount of reasonable argument could dissuade the passions of a man like Jem Lorry.

John Petty spoke in a voice that was thick and harsh: "What you're saying is only what I've known all along, and is the main reason why we can't begin to consider peace negotiations with these—these damned artificial beings. Gentlemen, there can be no peace but rather an intensification of extermination methods. We can't even risk one of the Machiavellian plans already discussed, because the danger of something going wrong is too great."

"By heaven," said a councilor, "he's right!"

Several voices firmly echoed the conviction; and there was suddenly no doubt which way the verdict would go. Kathleen saw Kier Gray glance keenly from face to face. He said:

"If that is to be our decision, then I

should consider it a grave mistake for any one of us at the present time to take this slan as mistress. It might give a wrong impression."

The silence that followed was the silence of agreement. Kathleen's gaze leaped to Jem Lorry's face. He met her eyes coolly, rising languidly to his feet as she stood up and made for the door. As she passed him he fell into step at her side.

As he opened the door for her he spoke in a low voice: "It won't be for long, my lady. So don't build up false hopes." And he smiled confidently.

But it was not of his threat that Kathleen was thinking as she walked slowly along the corridor. She was remembering the thunderstruck expression that had come into Kier Gray's face at the moment John Petty had asked for her death.

And it didn't fit. It didn't fit at all with his suave words of a minute later, when he had informed the others that the slan ship was robot-propelled. If that were so, then why had he been startled? And if it weren't so—then Kier Gray had taken the terrific risk of lying for her; and was probably even now worrying about it.

XI

EYES NARROWED, Jommy Cross stared thoughtfully down at the pale, wrecked spectacle that was Granny. There was no rage in him at her betrayal of him, rather a melancholy sense of the inevitability of what had happened.

Now the problem was: what to do with the old fool?

She sat almost blithely in a chair, an extravagantly rich and colorful dressing gown swaddled jauntily around her ungainly form. She giggled up at him:

"Granny knows something, yes, Granny knows—" Her words trailed into nonsense, then: "—money, oh, good lord, yes. Granny's got plenty of money for her old age, see!"

With the trusting innocence of a well-stewed old soak, she slid a bulging black bag from inside her dressing gown, then with ostrichlike common sense, jerked it back into hiding.

Jommy Cross was conscious of shock. It was the first time he had actually seen her money, although he had always knows her various hiding places.

But still he stood there, undecided, becoming tenser as the first faint pressure of men's thoughts from outside the shack made an almost impalpable weight against his brain. Dozens of men, edging closer, the snub noses of their submachine guns protruding ahead of them.

He frowned. By all rights, he should leave the betrayer to face the rage of the baffled hunters. Through his mind ran the nightmarish picture of Granny shrieking for mercy—Granny fighting, kicking, scratching, slobbering at her captors—*ugh!*

He reached down and grabbed her clammy, naked shoulders where the dressing gown was loosely drawn. He shook her with a cold, deadly violence till a modicum of sanity came into her eyes. He said harshly:

"It's death for you if you stay here. Don't you know the law?"

"Huh!" She sat up, briefly startled, then abruptly slipped off again into the oblivion of drunkedness.

Hurry, hurry, he thought, and forced his brain to consider chances. The weight of the men's minds was a heavy, dragging thing on his brain. They were nearer now, drawing an ever tighter circle. Their numbers appalled him. Even the great weapon in his pocket might be useless if a hail of bullets swept the resistless walls of the shack. And only one bullet was needed to destroy all his father's dreams.

"By God," he said aloud furiously, "I'm a fool! What will I do with you, even if I get you out? All highways out of the city will be blocked. There's only one real hope, and that'll be almost hopelessly hard even without a drunken old woman to hinder me. I don't fancy climbing a thirty-story building with

you on my back."

Logic said to hell with her. He half turned away; and then, once more, thought of Granny dying at the hands of a mob came in all its horror. Damn it! Whatever her faults, her very existence had made it possible for him to continue alive. That was a debt which must be paid.

"All right, I'll save you," Jommy Cross snapped to the drunken hag. "You and your money!" He smiled grimly as she grabbed it from him. "We've got a tunnel to go through. It leads from my bedroom to a private garage at the corner of Four-hundred-seventieth Street. I've got a key to the car. We'll drive down near the Air Center. I'll carry you to the roof and steal one of those planes."

He stopped, conscious of the unutterable flimsiness of that final part of his plan. It seemed completely incredible that the tendrilless slans would be so hopelessly organized that he would actually be able to get one of those marvelous spaceships which nightly launched into the sky.

* * * * *

With a gasp, Jommy set the old woman down on the flat roof of the spaceship building. He sank down beside her heavily, his six slim feet of body collapsed onto the roof. For the first time in his life he was conscious of sheer muscular weariness, contracted from exertion at the full of vibrant health.

"Good heavens," he breathed, "who'd have thought an old woman would weigh so much?"

The old woman sobered by alarm, was snarling in retrospect terror from that frightful climb. His brain caught the first warning of the burst of fury vituperations that was rising to her lips. His weary muscles galvanized instantly and one swift hand clamped over her mouth.

"Shut up," he muttered, "or I'll drop you over the edge like a sack of potatoes. You're the cause of this horrible situation. You'd better mind your manners."

His words acted like a dash of cold water. He had to admire the way she recuperated from the desperate fear that had racked her. The old devil certainly had staying powers. She pulled his hand from her mouth and asked sullenly: "What now?"

"We've got to find a way into the building in as short a time as possible."

Time! He glanced at his wrist watch; and, dismayed, leaped to his feet. Twelve minutes to ten!

Twelve minutes before the rocketship took off for Mars! Twelve minutes to seize control of that ship!

He snatched Granny up, flung her lightly over his shoulder, and raced off toward the center of the roof. No time now to search for doors! There was only one way. Somewhere near must be the runway up which the ships were projected when they launched toward the remote regions of interplanetary space.

Abruptly he felt a difference beneath his feet, a vague rise, a gentle bulbousness. He stopped short, teetering on his toes. Carefully he felt his way back to the beginning of the bulbous section. That would be the edge of the runway.

The atomic gun he literally tore from his pocket. Its intolerable disintegrating fire flamed downward.

He peered through the four-foot-in-diameter hole into a great, shining tunnel that sloped into depths at an angle that must have been a tight sixty-five degrees. A hundred, two hundred, three hundred yards of glistening metal tunnel wall; and at the very bottom—

THE SHIP that lay there gradually took on outline as Jommy's eyes grew accustomed to the dim light. There was a torpedo-pointed nose, with dimly visible forward blast tubes distorting the smooth, streamlined effect. A queer, deadly thing, silent and moveless, yet strangely, abnormally menacing.

It was as if he was staring down the barrel of a vast gun, at the shell that was about to be fired. The comparison struck him so sharply that for a long,

terrible moment his mind refused to hold the thought of what he must do.

Doubt came in waves as he stood there. Dare he slide down that glass-smooth slipway when any second a rocketship in all the fury and power of irrisistible motion could come smashing up toward the sky?

"What do you keep staring down that hole for?" Granny whined. "Where's the door? Time's passing!"

Thought of time nearly knocked him down. His watch said eight minutes to ten, and that seemed to shock even his bones. Eight minutes actually gone, *four* minutes to conquer a fortress.

He caught Granny's thought then, her abrupt awareness of his intention. Just in time his hand slapped at her mouth; and her shriek of dismay stifled against his palm. The next second they were falling, committed irrevocably.

They struck the tunnel surface almost gently, as if they had suddenly entered a world of slow motion. The slipway felt, not hard, but yielding beneath his body; and there was only the vaguest sense of motion.

But his eyes and mind were not fooled for an instant. The blunt nose of the spaceship so many hundreds of yards away, in one short moment plunged up at them. The illusion of the ship roaring toward them in full blast was so real that he had to hold the emotional part of his brain in leash, so great was the impulse to panic.

"Quick!" he hissed at Granny. "Use the flat of your hands—*slow down!*"

The old woman needed no urging. Of all the instincts in her misused body, that of survival was immeasurably the strongest. She couldn't have screamed now to save her soul, but her lips blubbered with fear even as she fought for life. Her beadlike eyes glistened with a horrible, moist terror—but she *fought!* She clung at the gleaming metal, bony hands spread out flat and

[Turn page]

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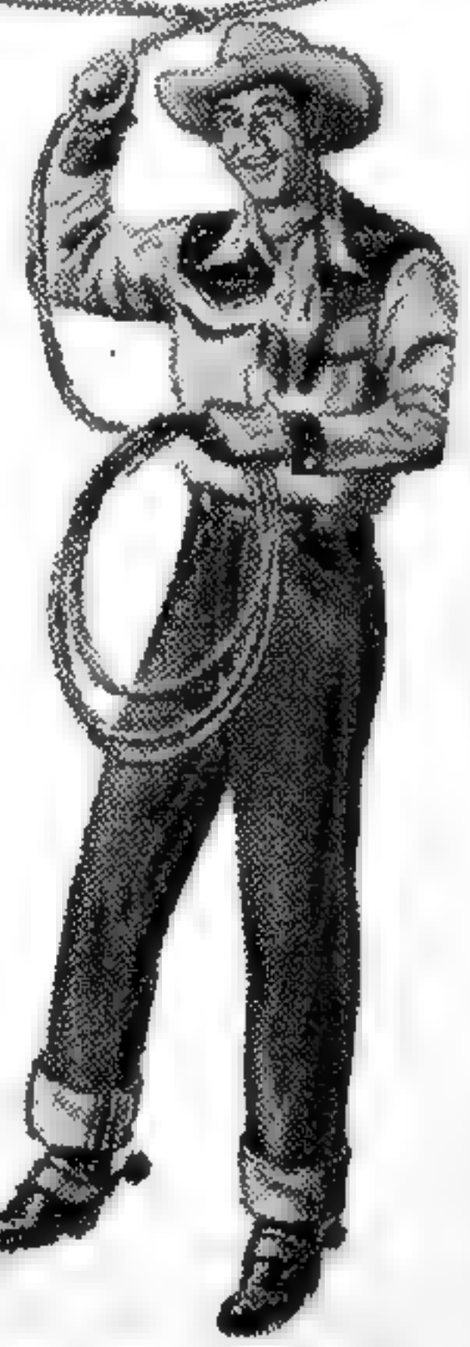

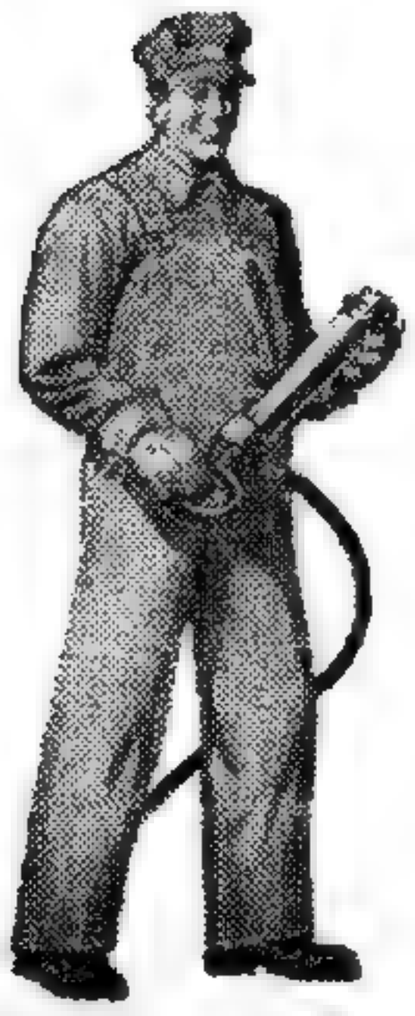

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hard, her legs squeezed against the metal surface; and pitiful though the result was—it helped.

Abruptly, the nose of the ship loomed above Jommy Cross, higher than he had thought. With the desperate, special strength of slan muscles, his fingers caught one of the big tubes of the second ring of fire chambers with such unbreakable hold that the uncontrollable part of the journey ended at that very moment.

Sick from the strain of too much effort, he let go, and sat there, mastering his dizziness. Now he grew aware of the patch of light farther under the immense body of the machine.

The ship was curving so sharply now toward the tunnel floor on which it rested that he had to bend double as he made his way toward it painfully. He was thinking: Maybe it's an open door, a few short seconds before the great ship is due to leave?

It was a door! A two-foot-in-diameter opening in a foot-thick metal hull, with the hinged door leaning inward. He pushed up into the opening unhesitating, holding his terrible gun ready for the slightest movement. There was nothing, no one.

In that one swift first glance he saw that this was the control room. There were some chairs, an intricate-looking instrument board, and some great curved, glowing plates on either side of it—and there was an open door leading to the second section of the ship.

It took but a moment to leap inside and to pull the panicky old woman after him; and then, lightly, he jumped for the connecting door.

AT THE threshold he paused cautiously and peered in. This second room was partly furnished with chairs, the same deep, comfortable chairs as in the control room—but more than half the space was filled with chained-down packing cases.

Abruptly from outside the ship a thought wash from many brains came to him, seeping through as leakage from behind defective shields. Menacing, angry thoughts! Hidden near the ship, scores of tendrilless slans were waiting —for what?

Instantly he jumped toward the instrument board that dominated the control room. The board itself was about a yard wide, two yards long, a metal-mounted bank of glowing tubes and shining mechanisms. There were more than a dozen control levers of various kinds, all within reach of the finely built chair facing them.

On either side of the instrument board were the great, curved, glossy, semimetallic plates he had already noticed. The concave surface of each towering section glowed with a subdued light of its own.

Utterly strange mechanism! It would be impossible to solve this alien control system in the few moments at his disposal. Tight-lipped, he sprang forward into the control chair. With swift, deliberately crude purpose he activated every switch and lever in sight.

A door clanged metallically. There was an abrupt, wonderful sénse of extraordinary lightness; swift, almost body-crushing forward movement, and then a faint, throbbing bass roar.

Instantly the purpose of the great curved metallike plates became apparent. On the one to the right appeared a picture of the sky ahead. Jommy could see lights and land far below, but the ship was mounting too steeply for the Earth to be more than a distortion at the bottom of the plate.

It was the left visiplate that showed the glory, an incredibly lovely picture of a city of lights, so vast that it staggered the imagination, falling away behind the ship. Far to one side he caught the night splendor of the palace.

And then the city was gone into distance behind them. Carefully he shut off the mechanisms he had actuated, watching for the effect of each in turn. In two minutes the complicated board was solved and the simple machinery

under control. The purpose of four of the switches was not clear, but that could wait.

He leveled off, for it was no part of his intention to go out into airless space. That demanded intimate knowledge of every screw and plate in the machine; and his first purpose must be to establish a new, safe base of operations. Then, with his ship to take him where he willed to go—

His brain soared. There was in him suddenly an extravagant sense of sheer power. A thousand things remained to be done, but at last he was out of his cage—old enough and strong enough, mentally and physically, to live a secure existence.

There were years to be passed, long years that separated him from maturity. All his father's science must be learned, and used! Above all, his first real plan for finding the true slans must be carefully thought out, and the first exploratory moves made. Finally—

The thought ended as he grew abruptly, queerly aware of Granny. The old woman's thought had been a gentle beat against his brain all these minutes. He was aware of her going into the next room; and deep in his mind was a developing picture of what she was seeing. And now—just like that—the picture went dead slow, as if she had suddenly fallen asleep. This warned him!

With a gasp, Jommy Cross snatched his gun. He whirled, simultaneously leaping desperately to one side. There was a flash of fire from the doorway that seared across the place where his head had been.

The flame touched the instrument board, then winked out. The tall, magnificently beautiful, full-grown tendrilless slan woman standing in the doorway whipped the muzzle of her little silver gun toward him. Then her whole body went rigid as she saw his weapon pointing at her.

They stood like that for a long, frozen moment. The woman's eyes became glittering pools.

"You damned snake!"

In spite of anger, almost because of it, her voice was golden in its vibrant beauty. Abruptly Jommy Cross felt beaten. The sight of her and the sound of her brought sudden poignant memory of his glorious mother. He knew he could no more blast this marvelous creature out of existence than he could have destroyed his own mother. Regardless of his mighty gun, he was actually at her mercy.

And the way that she had fired at his back showed the hot determination that burned behind those fine gray eyes. Murder! The mad, utterly incomprehensible murder desire of the tendrilless slan against the true slan!

XII

DESPITE his dismay, Jommy studied her with growing fascination. Slimly, strongly, exquisitely formed, she stood there, poised and alert. Her right hand holding the silver weapon, was slender, finely shaped; her left hand was half hidden behind her.

Her dress was a simple tunic, drawn in snugly at her waist, and her head—

What a proudly tilted head it was, hair gleaming dark brown, bobbed and curled; and her face inset in that crown of glorious brown was the epitome of sensitive loveliness.

No, he couldn't shoot; he couldn't blast this exquisitely beautiful creature out of existence. And yet he must make her think that he could. He stood there, watching the surface of her mind, the little half thoughts that flicked across it. There was in her shield the same quality of incomplete coverage that he had already noticed in the tendrilless slans, due probably to their inability to read minds and therefore to realize what complete coverage actually meant.

For the moment he could not allow himself to follow the little memory vibrations that pulsed from her. All that counted was that he was standing

here facing this tremendously dangerous woman.

Before Jommy could speak, the woman said:

"This is very foolish. We should sit down, put our weapons on the floor in front of us and talk this thing over."

Jommy Cross felt startled. The very suggestion showed the psychological strength of his position, but he was conscious of suspicion, a distinct conviction that her offer must be examined for special dangers. He said slowly:

"The advantage would be yours. You're a grown-up slan and your muscles are better co-ordinated. You could reach your gun faster than I could reach mine."

She nodded matter-of-factly. "That's true. But actually, you have the advantage in your ability to watch at least part of my mind."

"To the contrary"—he spoke the lie smoothly—"When your mind shield is up the coverage is so complete that I could not possibly divine your purpose or intention before it was too late."

The uttering of the words brought him sharp awareness of how incomplete her coverage really was. In spite of her shield, enough of her thoughts had come through to give him a brief but coherent history of the woman.

She was a regular pilot on the Martian way, but this was to be her last trip for many months. The reason being that she had recently married an engineer stationed on Mars, and now she was going to have a baby—so was being assigned to duties that put less strain upon her nervous system.

Jommy Cross began to feel easier; a newlywed expecting a child was not likely to take desperate chances. He said:

"Very well, let us put our guns on the deck simultaneously and sit down."

When the guns were on the floor, Jommy Cross glanced across at the slan woman, puzzled by the faintly amused smile that twisted her lips. The smile became broader, more distinctly ironic.

"And now that you have disarmed yourself," she said softly, "you will put up your hands—and prepare to die!"

In unutterable dismay, Jommy Cross stared at the tiny gun that glittered in her left hand. She must have held the toy-sized weapon concealed there all those tense moments, waiting with a mocking certainty, the opportunity of using it. Her golden-rich voice, beautiful as music, went on:

"So you swallowed all that about my being a poor little bride, with a baby coming and an anxious husband waiting! A full-grown snake wouldn't have been so credulous. As it is, the young snake I'm looking at, will die for his incredible stupidity."

TENSE with shock, Jommy Cross stared at the little gun held so firmly, so unwaveringly by the tendrilless slan woman. For the moment he was preternaturally aware of a background to his chagrin. The smooth-flowing, enormously swift movement of the ship. There was no acceleration, simply that tireless, hurtling pace, the mile on mile of headlong flight, whether in Earth's atmosphere or in free space no longer mattered.

He stood there dismayed, but quite empty of terror—and empty of plan. The woman, Joanna Hillory, had used her very defects to defeat him.

She must have known her thought shield was faulty; and so, with the purest of animal cunning, she had allowed that pathetic little story to leak through, designed to show him that she would never, oh, never, have the courage for a fight to the finish. It was easy to see now that her courage was a chilled-steel affair that he could only hope to equal with the years.

He moved obediently to one side as she gestured menacingly, and then watched her alertly as she bent gingerly to pick up the two weapons on the floor, first her own, then his. But not for the barest instant did her eyes shift from him; there was not so much as a quiver

of weakness in the way her gun pointed at him.

She put away the small weapon that had tricked him, kept her larger gun in her right hand; and, without a glance at his gun, locked it in a drawer beneath the glowing instrument board.

Logic left no room for the hope that somehow he might trick her into turning her weapon aside. The fact that she had not shot him out of hand must mean that she wanted to talk to him first. But he could not leave that possibility to chance. He said huskily:

"Do you mind if I ask a few questions before you kill me?"

"I'll ask the questions," she replied coolly. "There can be no purpose in your satisfying any curiosity you may have. How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

She nodded. "Good. So long as you answer my questions I shall not pull the trigger of this little electric-energy gun."

Jommy Cross stared at her. "How do you know I'll tell the truth?" he asked.

Her smile was confident: "Truth is implicit in the cleverest lies. We tendrilless slans, lacking the ability to read minds, have been forced by necessity to develop psychology to the utmost limits. But never mind that. Who are you?"

Quietly he gave her a brief history of his life. As his story developed, he grew conscious that the woman's fine eyes were narrowing, lines of surprise gathering on her forehead.

"Are you trying to tell me," she cut in sharply, "that you are the little boy who came into the main offices of Air Center six years ago?"

He nodded. "It was the greatest shock of my life to find a crew so murderous that even a child must be destroyed forthwith. The whole affair smacked of madness."

She ignored him, went on as if she hadn't heard: "Since then we've waited anxiously for a follow-up from the snakes. First they sent a child to spy on us. We were pretty sure that they wouldn't betray us, because they wouldn't want our greatest invention, the spaceship, to fall into the hands of human beings. The main question in our minds was: What was the purpose behind that first exploratory maneuver? Now, in your attempted theft of a rocketship, we have the answer."

STARTLED into silence, Jommy Cross listened to the utterly mistaken analysis. Dismay grew in him, dismay that had nothing to do with his personal danger. It was—it was the incredible insanity of this slan-versus-slan war. The deadliness of it was almost beyond imagination. Joanna Hillory went on in her vibrant voice, tinged now with triumph:

"It's good to know for sure what we have so long suspected; and the evidence is almost overwhelming now. We have explored the Moon, Mars, and Venus. We have gone as far afield as the moons of Jupiter; and not once have we seen an alien spaceship or the faintest sign of a snake.

"The conclusion is inescapable. For some reason, perhaps because their revealing tendrils make it necessary for them to be ever on the move, they have never developed the anti-gravity screens that make the rocketship possible. Whatever the reason, the chain of logic points inexorably to the fact that they do lack space travel."

"You and your logic," said Jommy Cross, "are beginning to be very tiresome. It seems unbelievable that a slan could be so utterly wrong. For just one second, assume that my story is true."

She smiled, a thin smile that barely touched her lips. "From the beginning, there has been the possibility the snakes do not know we control Airways. If your story is true, we must kill you to prevent you from betraying us. It is our policy to take no chances whatsoever with snakes. Your death is as certain as if you were already dead."

Harsh words, icily spoken. But it was not the harshness of the tone that affected Jommy Cross. It was the appalling fact that neither right nor wrong, truth nor untruth, mattered to this slan woman. His whole world was shattering before the overwhelming thought that, if this was slan justice, then slans were cruel and hateful. Jommy Cross was horrified that all the papers of his father's secret science, which he had removed from the catacombs such a short time before, would be plucked from the pockets of his corpse and horribly misused in this mad war of slan, human and tendrilless slan. Was it really possible that his father's great dreams and greater works were to be blotted out in a solitary waste of nothingness, destroyed and ruined by these insane fratricidals?

Never! Not while life and breath remained in his body. In spite of logic, in spite of the certainty that he could not hope to catch a full-grown slan off guard, he must win!

Desperately, Jommy began to argue urgently, yet conscious of the need for calm words:

"I must admit my own reason is paralyzed by this feud between slan and tendrilless slan. Don't your people realize how tremendously the entire slan position would improve if you would cooperate with the 'snakes?' "

The gray fire came back into her eyes, but there was scathing mockery in her voice: "A little history may enlighten you on the matter of slan cooperation. For nearly four hundred years there have been tendrilless slans. Like the true slans, they're a distinct race, being born without tendrils, which is their only differentiation from the snakes. For security's sake, they formed communities in remote districts where the danger of discovery was reduced to a minimum. They were prepared for complete friendliness with the true slans against the common enemy—human beings!

"What was their horror, then, to find themselves attacked and murdered, their carefully built up, isolated civilization destroyed by fire and weapon—by the true slans! They made desperate efforts to establish contact, to become friends, but it was useless. They finally discovered that only in the highly dangerous, human-controlled cities could they find any safety. There the true slans, because of their revealing tendrils, dared not venture.

"Snakes!" The mockery was gone from her voice; only a hard bitterness remained. "What other word can possibly fit? We don't hate them, but we have a sense of utter frustration and distrust. Our policy of destroying them is one of self-defense. We hate them and they hate us."

"Why?" asked Jommy. "Why? Tell me, have you ever learned why the true slans hate your people?"

"No." She spoke doubtfully. "We've had ridiculous statements from captured tendrilled slans to the effect that they are simply not tolerating the existence of any variation of slan. Only the perfect result of Samuel Lann's machine must survive."

"Samuel—Lann's—machine!" Jommy Cross felt almost physically ill, his thread of faith jarred to the roots. "Are you actually—do you mean it's true that slans were originally machine-made?"

HE SAW that the woman was staring at him, frowning, her brows sharply knit. She said slowly:

"I'm almost beginning to believe your story. I thought every slan knew of Samuel Lann's use of a mutation machine on his wife. Later, during the nameless period that followed the slan war, use of the mutation machine produced a new species: the tendrilless slans. Didn't your parents find out anything about such things?"

"That was supposed to be my job," Jommy Cross said unhappily. "I was to do the exploring, investigating, while Dad and Mother prepared the—"

He stopped in angry self-annoyance.

This was no time to make an admission that his father had devoted his life to science and wouldn't waste a single day on a search he had believed would be long and difficult. The first mention of science might lead this acutely intelligent woman to a real examination of his gun. She obviously believed the instrument to be a different model of her own electric-energy weapon. He went on jerkily:

"If those mutation machines are still in existence, then all these human accusations that slans are making monsters out of human babies are true."

"I've seen some of the monsters." Joanna Hillory nodded. "Failures, of course. There are so many failures."

XIII

GRIM revelation! Her words had Jommy Cross almost past shock. All the things that he had believed for so long, believed with passion and pride —the utmost depth of intensity—were tumbling like so many card houses. The ugly lies were not lies. Human beings were fighting a Machiavellian scourge almost inconceivable in its inhumanity. With a start, he grew aware he was receiving a thought message from Granny.

Granny! Granny's active, conscious thought stream! The old wretch was awake, recovered from the blow that Joanna Hillory had struck—the blow that had caused that cessation of her thought, awareness of which had saved his life in the first place. And her tough, resilient body had weathered sudden violence as easily as it had withstood for so long the repeated assaults of liquor.

By pausing to question Jommy, Joanna Hillory had given Granny time to recuperate from the blow.

Jommy Cross opened his mind wide to the flood of Granny's thought. It came in a perfect storm of vibration.

"Jommy, she'll kill us both. But Granny's got a plan. Make some sign that you've heard her. Tap your feet. Jommy, Granny's got a plan to stop her from killing us—"

Over and over came the insistent message. Granny was alive; Granny was aware of danger, and Granny was prepared to co-operate to desperate lengths to avert that peril.

Casually, Jommy Cross began to tap his feet on the floor, harder, louder, until—

"Granny hears." He stopped his tapping. Her excited thought went on: "Granny really has two plans. The first is for Granny to make a loud noise. That will startle the woman and give you a chance to leap on her. Then Granny will rush in to help.

"The second plan is for Granny to get up from the floor where she's lying, sneak over to your door, and then jump in at the woman when she passes near the door. She'll be startled, and instantly you can leap for her.

"Granny will call 'One!' then 'Two!' Tap your feet after the plan number you think best. Think them over for a moment."

No thought was required. Plan One he instantly rejected. No loud noise would really distract the calm nerves of a slan. A physical attack, something concrete, was the only hope.

"One!" said Granny into his mind. He waited, ironically aware of the anxious overtones in her thought, the forlorn hope that he would find Plan One satisfactory and so lessen the danger to her own precious skin. But she was a practical old cuss; and deep in her brain was the conviction that Plan One was weak. At last her mind reluctantly pumped out the word: "Two!"

Jommy Cross tapped his feet. Simultaneously, he grew aware that Joanna Hillory was talking into her radio, making a report to the tendrilless slans at the airport, and offering her own opinion that this young snake must be destroyed.

Then Jommy became aware that one of the women wanted to know his name.

For a long moment it didn't strike him that he was being directly addressed:

"Your name?" said the radio voice.

Joanna Hillory moved away from the radio toward the door. She said sharply: "Are you deaf? She wants to know your name."

JOMMY'S whole mind was concentrated irrevocably on Granny's brain as she stood behind the door, tense, waiting—and his eyes blazed at Joanna Hillory so near that door.

"Name!" he said, stupidly. It was now—or never! Urgently he tapped his feet.

And in that instant every extraneous thought was shoved out of his consciousness. He was aware only of Granny's mind and the violent stream of vibration that poured from her, as she lunged into the room, eyes glittering malignantly, snags of teeth bared like tusks. Like an evil, attacking witch, she launched herself against the back of Joanna Hillory. Thin, bony arms embraced the arms and shoulders of the slan woman.

There was a flash of sparkling flame as the weapon in Joanna Hillory's fingers discharged in futile fury at the floor. Then, like a striking leopard, she spun with irresistible strength. For one desperate moment the old woman clung to her shoulders—that one, all-necessary moment. In that instant Jommy Cross sprang.

In that instant, too, came a shrill squawk from Granny. Her clawlike hands were torn from their holds, and the gaunt, dark body skidded along the floor, routed.

Jommy Cross did not try to match a strength he felt sure was beyond his present powers to equal. As Joanna Hillory jumped toward him, he struck one hard, swift blow across her neck with the edge of his hand.

It was a dangerous blow; and it required perfect co-ordination of muscles and nerves. It could easily have broken her neck; instead it skillfully and efficiently knocked her unconscious.

He caught her as she fell, and lowered her to the floor. Then he turned and stared solemnly at Granny, who was lying on the floor.

"We're in a bad fix," he said. "This ship, this slan woman—are part of a trap where nothing has been left to chance. There are seven heavily armed, hundred-thousand-ton cruisers trailing us at this very moment. Their finder instruments react to our antigravity plates, so even darkness is no protection. We're finished."

The hours of night dragged on. With each passing moment the problem of what to do grew more urgent. Granny sprawled in one of the pneumatic chairs, sleeping noisily. The two slans, in that throbbing, hurtling ship, remained awake.

Fantastic night! On the one hand was the knowledge of the destroying power that might strike at any minute; and on the other hand strained hope.

Fascinated, Jommy Cross stared into the visiplate at the wondrous picture that sped beneath him. It was a world of lights, shining in every direction as far as the eye could see—lights and more lights. Splashes, pools, ponds, lakes, oceans of light—farm communities, villages, towns and cities, and every little while—mile on mile of megalopolitan colossus.

At last his gaze lifted from the visiplate and he turned to where Joanna Hillory sat, her hands and feet tied. Her gray eyes met his brown questioningly. Before he could speak she said:

"Well, have you decided yet?"

"Decided what?"

"When you're going to kill me, of course."

Jommy Cross shook his head slowly, gravely. "No," he said. "I'm not going to kill you. I'm going to release you. But, the important thing is the seven warships that are trailing us at this minute."

"It's too bad you found out about

them," the slan woman said. "They'll wipe you out!"

"I'm not dead yet!" Jommy Cross said, and impatience was suddenly sharp in his tone. "There must be a way out of this trap. If my destruction is so certain, why should those ships wait?"

JOANNA HILLORY was smiling, her fine, strong face relaxed. "You don't really expect me to answer your questions, do you?"

"Yes." Jommy Cross smiled grimly. "You see, I've grown somewhat older during the last few hours. Until last night I was really very much of an innocent. I need information, and I mean to get it from you—with or without your consent."

The woman's perfect lips pursed in sudden, frowning thought. "I think I'm beginning to understand." For the first time she was afraid.

"It's really very simple." Jommy Cross said. "You either answer my questions or I'll knock you over the head and obtain the information from your unconscious mind."

The woman began: "How do you know I'll tell the truth?" She stopped, her gray eyes widening with apprehension as she glared at Jommy. "Do you expect to rob my mind?"

"I do!" He stared ironically into her glowing, hostile eyes. "You will lower your mind shield. Of course, I don't expect free access to your brain. That would be like asking you to undress. I have no objections to you controlling your thoughts on a narrow range all around the subject. But your shield must go down—now!"

She sat very still, body rigid, gray eyes agleam with repugnance.

"Very well," she replied reluctantly. "It doesn't matter. You'll soon be dead, so I'll answer your questions."

It was disconcerting. He had expected more opposition, or a hint of doubt regarding his fate. But here was only unpleasant certainty of the death she foresaw for him. Was it possible that there really was no hope?

Joanna Hillory's mind was like a book whose thickness could not be measured, an incredibly rich, complex structure. Jommy Cross caught swift, tantalizing glimpses of her recent experiences. There was, briefly, the picture of an unutterably bleak planet, low-mountained, sandy, frozen, everything frozen —Mars! There were pictures of a gorgeous, glass-inclosed city of great machines digging under a blazing battery of lights. Somewhere it was snowing with a bitter, unearthly fury—and a black spaceship, glittering like a dark jewel in the Sun, was briefly visible through a thick plate-glass window. . . .

The confusion of thoughts cleared as she began to talk. She spoke slowly; and he made no attempt to hurry her, in spite of his convictions that every second counted—that at any minute now death would blast from the sky at his defenseless ship.

The tendrilless slans had known from the moment he started to climb the airways wall that an interloper was coming. Interested primarily in his purpose, they had made no effort to stop him. They left several ways open for him to get to the ship.

The reason the warships were slow in destroying him was because they hesitated to use their searchlights over a continent so densely inhabited. On the other hand, if he chose to circle around on the continent, his fuel would waste away in a dozen hours. Before that, dawn would come and enable the electric projectors to be used with brief, deadly effect.

"Suppose," said Jommy Cross, "I should land in the downtown section of a great city? I could very possibly escape among so many houses, buildings and people."

Joanna Hillory shook her head. "If this ship's speed falls below two hundred miles per hour, it will be destroyed, regardless of the fact that they hope to save my life."

FOR a long moment Jommy Cross was silent. He was convinced of the imminence of the danger. There was nothing clever about the plan; here was simply a crude reliance on big guns and plenty of them.

"All this," he marveled at last, "for one poor half-grown slan, and one ship! How mighty the fear must be that prompts so much effort, so much expense, for so little return!"

Joanna Hillory merely shrugged.

Jommy Cross frowned unhappily. He had one unknown factor, which had so far escaped their knowledge. His atomic gun! His one asset that they still didn't suspect. It would be useless, of course, against the battle cruisers coasting along in the blackness behind him. But certain things it could do. What it could touch, its shattering fire would disintegrate into component atoms. Yes, by heaven, he had the answer! Given time and a little luck he'd outwit them yet!

The glare of a searchlight splashed against his visiplates. Simultaneously, the ship jumped like some toy that had been struck an intolerable blow. Metal squealed, walls shook, lights blinked. Then, as the sounds of violence died into little menacing whispers, he bounded from the deeps of the chair into which he had been flung, and pressed the rocket activator button.

The machine leaped forward in dizzy acceleration. Against the pressure of plunging fury, he reached forward and clicked on the radio.

The battle was on. Now for the supreme test!

XIV

OUTSIDE, the night sky was dark; a sprinkling of stars glittered coldly in the moonless night. There was not a sign of an enemy ship.

Inside—the tense silence was shattered by a hoarse choking cry from the next room. An angry barrage of vituperation followed. Granny was awake.

"What's the matter?" the old hag screeched. "What's happened?"

Brief silence, and then, abrupt end of anger and mad beginning of fear. Instantly, her terrified thought poured out in frantic flood. Obscene fear curses assailed the air. Granny didn't want to die. Kill all slans, but not Granny. Granny had money to—

She was drunk. The sleep had allowed the liquor to take control of her again. Jommy Cross shut her thoughts out of his mind; urgently he spoke into the radio:

"Calling the commander of the warships. Calling the commander! Joanna Hillory is alive. I am willing to release her at dawn, the only condition being that I be allowed to get up into the air again."

There was silence, then a woman's quiet voice entered the room: "Joanna, are you there?"

"Yes, Marion."

"Very well, now I'll speak to your captor," the calm voice of the other went on. "Listen, snake: we accept on the following conditions: You will inform us an hour before the actual landing where it will be. The point of landing must be at least thirty miles—that is, five minutes allowing for acceleration and deceleration—from the nearest large city. We assume, of course, that you believe you can escape. You will have two hours more of opportunity. We shall have Joanna Hillory. A fair exchange!"

"I accept," said Jommy Cross.

"Wait!" cried Joanna Hillory. But Jommy Cross was too quick for her. The barest second before the word jerked from her lips, his finger flicked off the radio switch.

His eyes glinted at her suspiciously. "What in this sudden mad passion to sacrifice yourself simply to deny me two hours more of life?"

Her fine gray eyes flashed defiance. "You must not escape with this ship," she answered.

"I shall escape," Jommy Cross said

quietly. "I shall live, in spite of human beings, in spite of Kier Gray and John Petty and the ghoulish crew of murderers that live in the palace. I shall live in spite of the vastness of the tendrilless-slan organization, and their murder campaign—and some day I shall find the true slans. Not now, for no youth can hope to succeed where the tendrilless slans in their thousands have failed. But I shall find them, and on that day—"

He stopped; then, gravely: "Miss Hillory, I want to assure you that neither this nor any other ship will ever be turned against your people."

"You speak very rashly," she replied with sudden bitterness. "How can you assure anything in the name of those ruthless creatures who dominate the councils of the snakes?"

Jommy Cross gazed down at the woman. There might be truth in her words. Yet something of the greatness that was to be his came to him in that moment as he sat there in that finely built control room, with its glittering instrument board, the shining visiplates, his body deep in the beautifully constructed chair.

He was his father's son, heir to the products of his father's genius. Given time, he would be lord of irresistible power. The soft flame of those thoughts was in his voice as he said:

"Madam, in all modesty I can say that, of all the slans in the world today, there is none more important than the son of Peter Cross. Wherever I go, my words and my will shall rule. The day that I find the true slans, the war against your people shall end forever. You have said that my escape would be disaster for the tendrilless slans; rather it will be their greatest victory. Some day you and they will realize that."

The slan woman smiled grimly. "Meantime you have two hours to escape seven heavy cruisers owned by the real rulers of the Earth. What you do not seem to realize is that we actually fear neither human nor snake, that our organization is vast beyond imagination. Every village, every town, every city has its quota of tendrilless slans. We know our power; and one of these days we shall come out into the open, and take control. If you release me, you have two hours to live."

"Two hours!" Jommy Cross exclaimed sharply. She was right. He must work fast! He said harshly:

"Enough of this talk. And I'll have to carry you into the next room. I've got to rig up a vise at the inside of the nose of the ship, and I can't let you see what I put in that vise."

FOR a bare moment before Jommy Cross landed he saw the lights of the city to the west. Then the rising wall of valley blotted the flashing sea of brilliance from his view. Soft as a thistledown, the rocketship touched the ground and floated there with an unearthly buoyancy as Jommy Cross set the anti-gravity plates at half power. He clicked open the door and then untied the slan woman.

Her electric gun in hand—his own weapon was fastened in the vise he had set up—he watched Joanna Hillory as she paused for a moment in the doorway. Dawn was breaking over the hills to the east; and the light, still a sickly gray, made a queer silhouette of her strong, shapely figure. Without a word, she jumped to the ground below. As he stepped forward to the threshold he could see her head on a level now with the bottom of the doorway, reflecting the flood of light from inside the ship.

Her head turned; and the face that looked up at him was marked by deep, thoughtful lines. She said simply:

"How do you feel?"

He shrugged. "A little shaky, but death seems remote and not applicable to me."

"It's more than that," was the earnest reply. "The nervous system of a slan is an almost impregnable fortress. It cannot really be touched by insanity or 'nerves' or fear. When we kill, it is

because of policy arrived at through logic; when death approaches our personal lives, we accept the situation."

He stared at her curiously, his mind projecting against hers, feeling of the gentle pulsing of overtones, the strange half friendliness that was in her voice and overflowed from her mind. His eyes narrowed. What purpose was forming in her enormously alert, sensitive, completely unsentimental brain? She went on:

"Jommy Cross, it may surprise you to know that I have come to believe your story, and that you are not only what you say you are, but that you actually hold the ideals you have professed. You are the first true slan I have ever met; and, strangely, for the first time in my life I have a sense of tension eased, as if, after all these centuries, the deadly darkness is lifting.

"And Jommy Cross, if you escape our guns, I beg you to keep your ideals as you grow older, and don't betray us. Don't become a tool of creatures who have used only murder and destruction for so many, many years."

If he escaped! So that was it! If he escaped, they would be dependent on his good will; and she was playing that angle now for all she was worth. Clever!

"But remember one thing," Joanna Hillory went on, "you can expect no help from us. Too much depends upon it, the fate of too many people is involved. So do not expect to obtain mercy, Jommy Cross, because you have released me. Do not come into our midst. I warn you, it means swift death. And now, good-by—and, paradoxical as this may sound—good luck!"

He watched her as she walked lightly, swiftly, into the darkness that lay heavily on the valley to the west, the way that led to the city—his way, too. Her form became a shadow in the mist of rapid-fading light.

She was gone over a hill. Swiftly he closed the door, rushed into the storeroom and snatched a couple of space suits from the wall. The old woman babbled in feeble protest as he stuffed her forcibly into one of them. He crowded into his own as he scrambled into the control room.

He closed the door on the sobering leer that twisted Granny's face behind the transparent headpiece, and in a second was sitting tensely staring into the "sky" visiplate.

His fingers reached for the activator of the anti-gravity plates; and then—abruptly—came the hesitation, the doubt that had been growing in him each second that brought the inexorable moment of action nearer. Was it possible that his simple plan would actually work?

JOMMY CROSS could see the ships, little dark spots in the sky above him.

Sunlight was shining up there, a spray of brilliance that picked out the tiny torpedo shapes like so many fly spots on an immense blue ceiling.

The clouds and the mists of the valley were clearing with magical speed; and if the clarity with which he could see them through his visiplates was any criterion, then even the weather was against him. He was still in the shadows of his sweet, clean little valley; but in a few minutes now the very perfection of the day would begin to damage his chances enormously.

His brain was so tensely concentrated that for a moment the distorted thought that flowed into his mind seemed to come from himself: "—needn't worry. Old Granny'll get rid of the slan. Get some make-up and change her face. What's the good of having been an actress if you can't change your looks? Granny'll make a white lovely body like she used to have, and change this old face. Ugh!"

She seemed to spit in convulsions at the thought of her face, and Jommy Cross eased the picture out of his mind. But her words remained with him. His parents had used false hair, but the necessary mutilation of natural hair

and the constant recutting had proved very unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, true slans must be doing it all the time; and now that he was old enough to be able to make a reasonable efficient job of it, and—with Granny's help and experience—it might be the answer!

Strangely, now that a plan for the future had come, his hesitation vanished. Light as a dust mote, the ship fell away from Earth, and then jerked into enormous speed as the rockets kicked into life.

Five minutes to accelerate and decelerate, the slan commander had said. Jommy Cross smiled grimly. Well, he wasn't going to decelerate. At undiminished speed, he dived for the river that made a wide black swath at the outskirts of the city, the city he had picked because the river was there. At the very last moment he put on full deceleration.

And at that final moment, when it was already too late, the logic confidence of the slan commanders must have been shaken. They forgot their reluctance to use their guns and show their ships so near a human city. They swooped like great, immensely long birds of prey; fire sparkled from all seven cruisers—Jommy Cross pulled gently on the wire that pressed the trigger on his own weapon, mounted in the vise at the nose of the ship.

For outside, a violent blow added speed to the three-hundred-mile-an-hour clip of his machine. But he scarcely noticed it—the only effect of the enemy fire. His whole attention was concentrated on his own weapon.

As he pulled the wire there was a flare of white. Instantly a two-foot circle in the foot-thick nose of the craft vanished; the white, malignant destroyer ray leaped forth fanwise, dissolving the water of the river in front of the torpedo-shaped craft. Into the tunnel thus created, slipped the spaceship, decelerating at full, frightful blast of the forward tubes.

The visiplates went black with the water above and the water below, then blacker as the water ended and the inconceivable ferocity of the atom smasher bored on irresistibly into the ground beyond, deeper, deeper.

IT WAS like flying through air, only there was no resistance except the pressure of rocket blasts. The atoms of Earth, broken into their component elements, instantly lost their mathematically unreal solidity and assumed their actuality of a space tenuously occupied by matter. Ten million million years of built-up cohesion collapsed into the lowest primeval matter state.

With steady gaze, Jommy Cross stared at the second hand of his watch; Ten, twenty, thirty—one minute. He began to ease the nose of the ship upward, but the enormous pressure of deceleration made no physical easing possible. It was thirty seconds later before he cut the number of rocket blasts and the end was in sight.

After two minutes and twenty seconds of underground flight, the ship stopped. He must be near the center of the city, and there was approximately eight miles of tunnel behind him, into which water would be pouring from the tortured river. The water would close up the hole, but the baffled tendrilless slans would need no interpreter to tell them what had happened. Besides, their instruments would this very second be pointing directly at the location of his ship.

Jommy Cross laughed joyously. Let them know! What could they hope to do to him now? There was danger ahead, of course—immense danger; especially when he and Granny reached the surface. The entire ground organization of the tendrilless slans must have been warned by now.

Nevertheless, that was of the future. For the moment, victory was his. It was sweet, after so many desperate tiring hours. Now there was Granny's plan, which involved his separating from her, and disguise.

The laughter faded from his lips. He sat thoughtfully, then stalked into the adjoining compartment. The black moneybag he wanted lay on the old woman's lap, under the protection of one claw-like hand. Before she could even realize his intention, he had snatched it up. Calmly he held her off.

Granny shrieked and jumped at him.

"Don't get excited. I've decided to adopt your plan of make-up and that the two of us separate. I'm going to give you five thousand of this. The rest you'll get back about a year from now. Here's what you're to do:

"I need a place to live, and so you're going to go up into the mountains and buy a ranch or something. When you're located, put an ad in the local paper; I'll put an answering ad in, and we'll get together. I'll keep the money just in case you decide to doublecross me. Sorry, and all that, but you captured me in the first place, and so you'll just have to bear up with me.

"And now I've got to go back and block that tunnel. Some day I'm going to fit this ship with atomic energy, and I don't want them coming here meanwhile."

He'd have to leave this city fast, of course, for the time being—the beginning of a continental tour. There must be other tendrilled slans out there. And, just as his mother and father had met accidentally, pure chance alone should enable him to meet at least one slan. Besides, there was the first investigations to be made on the still vague, though great, plan that was taking form in this brain; the plan to think his way to the true slans.

XV

JOMMY CROSS seemed always to be driving along roads that gleamed toward distant horizons, or in strange cities—each with its endless swarm of human beings. The Sun rose and set, and rose and set; and there were dark days of drizzling rain, and there were countless nights.

In spite of aloneness, loneliness did not touch him, for his expanding soul fed an always dissatisfied eagerness at the tremendous drama that was daily enacted before his eyes. Everywhere he turned, the incredibly complex network of the tendrilless-slan organization met his gaze. And week by week he grew more puzzled. Where were the true slans?

The fantastic puzzle seemed a crazy, unanswerable thing that never left him. It haunted him in the quiet fastness of his small, well-equipped laboratory on Granny's valley ranch—it forced him on endless miles of journey in heartbreaking, futile search—it followed him now as he walked slowly up a street of the hundredth, or was it the thousandth, city?

Night lay upon the city, night spattered by countless glittering shop windows and a hundred million blazing lights. He walked to a newsstand and bought all the local papers, then back to his car, that very ordinary-looking, very special battleship on wheels which he never allowed out of his sight.

He stood beside the long, lowbuilt machine. A chilling night wind caught at the sheets of one paper as he turned page after page, briefly letting his gaze skim down the columns.

The wind grew colder as he stood there, bringing the damp-sweet smell of rain. A gust of chill air caught an edge of his paper, whipped it madly for a moment, abruptly tore it, then went screaming victoriously down the street, chasing the scrap of paper wildly.

He folded the newspaper decisively against the rising clamor of wind and climbed into the car. An hour later he tossed the seven daily papers into the corner waste-paper receptacle. Deep in thought, he re-entered the car and sat behind the steering wheel.

The same old story. Two of the papers were tendrilless slan. It was easy for his mind to note the subtle difference, the special coloration of the arti-

cles, the very way words were used—the distinct difference between the human-owned papers and those operated by the tendrilless slans. Two papers out of seven. But those two the ones with the highest circulation. It was a normal average.

Once more, that was all there was. Tendrilless slan and human being. No third group, none of the difference that he knew would show him when a paper was operated by true slans—if his theory was right.

It remained only to obtain all the weekly papers, and to spend the evening as he had spent the day, driving up and down the streets, searching each house, each passing mind. Then, he drove toward the distant east, the gathering tempest charged like some maddened beast through the black night.

Behind him, the night and the storm swallowed up another city, another failure.

THE water lay dark and still around the spaceship in that third year when Jommy Cross finally returned to the tunnel. Like a creature out of the night, he swirled around in the mud, turning the blazing force of his atomic-powered machines on the wounded metal thing.

Ten-point steel seared over the hole his disintegrator had carved on that day when he escaped the slan cruisers. And all through one almost endless week, a snug-fitting, leech-shaped, metal monstrosity hugged inch by inch over the surface of the ship, straining with its frightful power at the very structure of the atoms—till the foot-thick walls of the long, sleek machines were ten-point steel from end to end.

It took him some weeks to analyze the anti-gravity plates with their electrically built-up vibrations, and to fashion a counterpart, which, with grim irony, he left there in the tunnel—for it was on them that the detectors of the tendrilless slans operated. Let them think their craft still there.

Three months he slaved. Then, in the dead of one cold October night, the ship backed along six miles of tunnel on a cushion of resistless atomic drive, and plunged up through a mist of icy rain. The rain became sleet, then snow; then abruptly he was beyond the clouds, beyond Earth's petty furies. Above him, the vast canopy of the heavens glittered in a blazing array of stars that beckoned to his matchless ship.

There was Sirius, brightest jewel in that diadem; and there was Mars the red—but not for Mars was he heading today. Only a short, careful, exploratory voyage, this—a brief, cautious trip to the Moon, a test flight to provide that all-necessary experience which his logic would use as a basis for the long, dangerous journey that seemed to be becoming more inevitable with each passing month of his utterly futile search. Some day he would have to go to Mars.

Beneath him a blur of night-enveloped globe receded. At one edge of that sky-spreading mass, a blaze of light grew more brilliant as he watched. Abruptly, the fascinating glory of the approaching sunrise was jarred by the clanging of an alarm bell.

A pointer light flashed on and off discordantly far up on his forward visiplate. Decelerating at full speed, he watched the changing position of the light. Suddenly the light clicked off, and there, at the extreme range of his vision, was a ship.

The battleship was not coming directly toward him. It grew larger, became plainly visible just beyond the Earth's shadow, in the full glare of the Sun. It passed by him less than a hundred miles away, a thousand-foot structure of smooth, dark metal.

It plunged into the shadows and instantly vanished. In half an hour the alarm stopped ringing.

Ten minutes later, the alarm was clamoring again. The second ship was farther away, traveling at right angles to the path of the first. It was a smaller ship by far, destroyer size; and it did not follow a fixed path, but darted here

and there until it was almost out of sight.

When it was gone in the distance, Jommy Cross edged his ship forward, undecided now, almost awed. A battleship and a destroyer! Why? It seemed to indicate a patrol. But against whom? Not against humans, surely; they didn't even know the tendrilless slans and their ships existed. Jommy was thoroughly baffled.

He slowed his ship, stopped. He was not prepared yet to risk running a gantlet of well-equipped battleships. Watchfully, he swung his ship around—and in the middle of the turn he saw the small dark object, like a meteorite, rushing toward him.

In a flash he whipped aside—and the object twisted after him like a living monster of space. It loomed far up in his rear visiplate, a dark, round metal ball, about a yard in diameter. Frantically, Jommy Cross tried to maneuver his ship out of its path, but before he could make a turn there was a deafening, mind-shattering blast.

The explosion smashed him to the floor. The concussion kept him there, stunned, sick but still alive, and conscious that those sturdy walls had taken the almost intolerable blow.

The ship was rocking in frightful acceleration. Dizzily, Jommy Cross picked himself up and climbed back into the control chair. He'd struck a mine! By all the gods, a floating mine! What terrifying precautions were here—and against what!

Thoughtfully, he maneuvered his dented, almost disabled ship into a tunnel under the river that cut through Granny's ranch, a tunnel that curved up into the heart of a mountain peak, clear of the water that swirled after it.

How long it must remain hidden there he could not even hazard a guess. Only one thing was certain. He was not ready yet to either oppose or outwit the tendrilless slans—not ready, not ready.

TWO days later, Jommy Cross stood in the doorway of the rambling ranchhouse and watched their nearest neighbor, Mrs. Lanahan, come tight-lipped along the pathway that led between the two orchards. She was a plump blonde whose round baby face concealed a prying malicious mind. Her blue eyes glowed at Granny's tall, brown-haired, brown-eyed "grandson" with suspicion.

Jommy Cross eyed her with grim amusement as he opened the door for her and followed her into the house. In her mind was all the ignorance of the long-on-the-land in a world where education had become a pale shadow, a weak, characterless reflection of official cynicism. She didn't know exactly what a slan was, but she thought he was one, and she was out there to find out. She made a splendid subject for his crystal method of hypnotism. It was genuinely fascinating to watch the way she kept glancing at the tiny crystal he had put on the table beside her chair—observing the way she talked on, completely in character, never realizing when she ceased to be a free agent and became his slave.

She walked out finally into the glare of the late-fall sunshine, apparently unchanged. But forgotten was the errand that had brought her to the farmhouse, for her mind was conditioned to a new attitude toward slans; Not hatred—that was for a possible future that Jommy Cross could envision; and not approval—that was for her own protection in a world of slan haters.

The following day he saw her husband, a black-bearded giant of a man in a distant field. A quiet talk, a differently attuned crystal, brought him, too, under control.

During the months that he relaxed with the hypnotically sweetened old woman that had been Granny, he gained mental control of every one of the hundreds of farm people who dwelt in the idyllic climate of the valley there in the ever-green foothills. At first he

needed the crystals, but as his knowledge of the human mind grew, he found that, although it was a slower process, he could entirely dispense with that atomically unbalanced glass.

He estimated: At the rate of two thousand hypnotized a year, and not allowing for new generations, he could hypnotize the four billion people in the world in two million years. Conversely, two million slans could do it in a year, provided they possessed the secret of his crystals.

Two million needed; and he couldn't even find one! Damn it, somewhere there must be a true slan. And during the years that still must pass before he could logically pit his intelligence against the intellectual task involved in finding the true slan organization, he must search and search for that one!

XVI

REALIZING she was trapped, Kathleen Layton grew tense. Her slim young body straightened there beside the open drawer of Kier Gray's desk, the contents of which she had been studying. Her mind reached out with startled alertness, through intervening doors to where Kier Gray and another man were opening the door that led from her room through a corridor and another room to this—the dictator's own study.

She was conscious of desperate chagrin. For weeks she had waited for the council meeting that would claim Kier Gray's attendance and give her safe access to his study—and now this wild accident: for the first time in her experience, Kier Gray had gone to her room instead of summoning her to him. With all the other exits guarded, her one avenue of escape had been cut off and—

She was trapped! But not for one second did she regret her action in coming. An imprisoned slan could have no purpose but to escape from a deadly, apparently unending routine. The seriousness of her position struck deeper instant by instant. To be caught here red-handed! Abruptly she ceased putting the papers back into the drawer. No time. The men were just beyond the door now.

With sudden decision she closed the drawer, jerked the papers into a roughly neat pile at one side of the desk; and, like a fleeing fawn, rushed to an easy chair.

Simultaneously, the door opened; and John Petty came in, followed by Kier Gray. The two men stopped as they saw her. The police chief's darkly handsome, slightly in-curved face took on darker color; his eyes narrowed to slits. His gaze flicked questioningly to the dictator.

The leader's eyebrows were lifted quizzically, and there was the faintest hint of irony in the smile that came into his face.

"Hullo," he said. "What brings you here?"

Kathleen had come to a decision about that, but before she could speak, John Petty cut in; the man had a beautiful voice when he wanted to use it, and he used it now. He said gently:

"She's obviously been spying on you, Kier."

There was something about this man with his incisive logic that brought a chilling alarm to the girl. It seemed to be the dark destiny of the secret-police chief to be present at the critical moments of her life; and she knew with a stiffening of her courage that here was such a moment; and that of all the people in the world, John Petty would strive with the full passion of his hatred for her to make it deadly.

In chill tones the police head went on: "Kier, we come dramatically back to what we were discussing: Next week this slan girl will be twenty-one years of age, for all normal purposes an adult, though as a slan she will not attain maturity till she's thirty. Is she to live on here till she eventually dies of old age a hundred and fifty, or some such fantastic term of years from now? Or

what? I'd like to get a clear idea."

The smile on Kier Gray's face was grimmer. "Kathleen, didn't you know I was at the council meeting?"

"You bet she knew," John Petty interjected. "And its unexpected ending came as an unpleasant surprise."

Kathleen said coldly: "I refuse to make replies to any questioning in which that man participates. He's trying to keep his voice calm and logical, but in spite of the queer way in which he hides his thoughts, there is already a distinct glow of excitement streaming from him. The thought has come to the surface of his mind that at last he will be able to convince you that I ought to be destroyed."

The leader's face was oddly hostile. Her mind touched lightly at the surface of his brain, and there was a forming thought there, a developing decision, impossible to read. He said finally:

"Historically speaking, her charge against you is true, John. Your desire for her death is—er—proved—a tribute, of course, to your anti-slan zeal, but it is a queer fanaticism in so capable a man."

John Petty seemed to shake off the words in the impatient gesture he made. "The truth is, I want her dead and I don't want her dead. To me she constitutes a grave menace to the State, located here in the palace and possessing mind-reading ability. I simply want her out of the way. And, being unsentimental about slans, I consider death the most effective method.

"However, I will not urge such a verdict in view of my reputation for bias in this case. But I seriously think she should be moved to a different residence."

There was no thought near the surface of Kier Gray's mind to suggest that he intended to speak. His eyes were on her, unnecessarily steady. Kathleen said scathingly:

"The moment I am removed from this place, I will be murdered. As Mr. Gray said in effect ten years ago, after your hireling tried to murder me once—once a slan is dead, inquiries about the affair are viewed with suspicion."

She saw that Kier Gray was shaking his head at her. He said in the mildest, most unconvincing tone she had ever heard him use: "You assume far too readily, Kathleen, that I cannot protect you. On the whole, I think removal is the best plan."

She stared at him, stiff with dismay. He finished the virtual death sentence, his voice no longer mild, but even-toned, decisive:

"You will gather your clothes and possessions and prepare yourself for departure in twenty-four hours."

KATHLEEN simply stood there. After the first moment the shock of it passed. Nor was it incredulousness that kept her silent. Her mind was basically quite calm. The knowledge that Kier Gray had withdrawn his protection from her was too crystal-clear a realization for her to require any anticlimax of emotional disbelief.

What astounded her was that there was as yet no evidence on which he could have based a criminal judgment. He hadn't even glanced at the papers she had arranged so hurriedly on the desk. Therefore, his decision was based on the mere fact of her presence here and on John Petty's accusations.

Which was surprising, because he had in the past defended her from Petty under far more sinister circumstances. And she had come unpunished, unchecked, into this study on at least half a dozen other occasions.

It meant—his decision had been previously made, and therefore was beyond any argument she could hope to offer. In abrupt surprise, she grew aware that there was amazement, too, in John Petty's brain. The man was frowning at his easy victory. The surface of his mind vibrated briefly with a small stream of dissatisfaction, then abrupt decision to clinch the matter.

His gaze flicked keenly over the room

and came to rest on the desk. "The point is, what did she find out while she was alone in your study? Where are those papers?"

He was not a shy man; and even while he asked the questions he was stalking at the desk. As the leader came over behind him, Petty rippled through the sheets.

"Hm-m-m, the list of all the old slan hide-outs which we still use for trapping the unorganized slans. Fortunately, there are so many hundreds of them that she couldn't have had time to memorize their names, let alone descriptions of their locations."

The falseness of his conclusion was not what concerned Kathleen in that moment of discovery. Evidently neither man suspected that the location of every one of the slan hide-aways was not only imprinted indelibly on her mind, but that she had an almost photographic record of the alarm systems which the secret police had installed in each unit to warn them when an unsuspecting slan was entering. According to the shrewd analysis of one report, there must be some kind of thought broadcaster which made it possible for strange slans to find the hiding places. But that was unimportant just now.

What counted was Kier Gray. The leader was staring curiously at the papers. "This is more serious than I thought," he said slowly, and Kathleen's heart sank. "She's raided my desk."

Kathleen thought tensely: It wasn't necessary for him to let John Petty know that. The old Kier Gray would never have provided her worst enemy with an ounce of ammunition to use against her.

Kier Gray's eyes were cold as he turned to her. Strangely, the surface of his brain showed as calm and cool as she had ever known it to be. He was, she realized—abruptly calm herself—not angry, but, with an icy finality, breaking with her.

"You will go to your room and pack —and await further instructions."

She was turning away as John Petty said: "You have said on various occasions, sir, that you were keeping her alive for observation purposes only. If you move her from your presence, that purpose is no longer applicable. Therefore, I hope I am safe in assuming that she will be placed under the protection of the secret police."

FIRMLY Kathleen shut her mind to their two brains as she closed the door behind her and raced along the corridor to her room. She felt not the vaguest interest in the details of any hypocritical murder plan which might be worked out between the leader and his henchman.

Her course was clear. She opened the door leading from her room to the main corridors, nodded to the guard who acknowledged her greeting stiffly—and then she walked calmly to the nearest elevator.

Theoretically, she was only allowed to go to the five-hundred foot level, and not to the plane hangars, five hundred feet further up. But the stocky young soldier who operated the elevator proved no match for the blow that struck him slantingly on the jaw. Like most of the other men, Kathleen saw in his mind he had never accepted the statement that this tall, slender, devastatingly pretty girl was dangerous to a two-hundred-pound male in the prime of strength.

He was unconscious before he discovered his mistake. It was cruel, but she tied his hands and feet with wire and used wire to tie the gag into his mouth.

Arrived at the roof, she made a brief, thorough mind exploration of the immediate vicinity of the elevator. Finally she opened the door, then swiftly shut it behind her. There was a plane less than thirty feet away. Beyond it was another plane on which three mechanics were working. A soldier was talking to them.

It took her only ten seconds to walk to the plane and climb in. And she had

not picked the brains of air officers for nothing during the long years. The motor purred; the great machine glided forward; helicopters spinning madly, it launched into the air .

"Huh," the thoughts of a mechanic came after her, "there goes the Colonel again."

"Probably off after another woman." That was the soldier.

"Yeah," said the second mechanic, "trust that guy to—"

It took two hours of the swiftest southwest flying to reach the slan hideout she had selected. She set the plane on robot control and watched it fly off into the east. During the days that followed, she watched hungrily for a car. It was on the fifteenth day that a long, black machine purred out of a belt of trees along the ancient roadway and came toward her. Her body tensed. Somehow she had to get that driver to stop, overpower him—and take his car. Any hour now the secret police would be swooping down—she must get away from here, and fast. Eyes fixed on the car, she waited.

The flat, wintry vastness of the prairie was behind him at last. Jommy Cross turned north, then south. Far south! And ran into an apparently endless series of police barricades. No effort was made to stop him; and he saw in the minds of the men that they were searching for a girl.

The number of police increased; and finally, as a precaution, he deserted the main highway for a quiet side road that wound down into tree-filled valleys, and up over tall hills. The morning had been gray, but at noon the sun came out and shone gloriously from a sky of azure blue.

The clear-cut impression of well being ended abruptly as an outside thought touched his mind; a gentle pulsation it was, yet so tremendous that his brain rocked:

"Attention, slans! Please turn up the side road half a mile ahead. A further message will be given later."

He caught his spinning mind, stiffened the blurred confusion of trees and grass and blue-bright skies into coherency—soft and insistent, the following thought waves of the message beat at him over and over, gentle as a summer rain:

"Attention, slans! Please turn . . ."

He drove on, the very blood in his veins singing with a high excitement. After all these—ages—the miracle had happened. Slans! Somewhere near! And many of them! Such a thought machine might have been developed by an individual, but the message suggested somehow the presence of a community; and it could be true slans—or could it?

The swift, sweet flow of his joy became a trickle as his mind pondered the possibility of a monstrous trap. No real danger, of course; not with this car to deflect dangerous blows and his weapons to paralyze the striking power of any enemy. But it was just as well to be prepared.

UNHESITATING, the beautiful, streamlined machine rolled forward; in less than a minute Jommy Cross saw the pathway—it was little more than that. The abnormally long car whipped into it and along it. The pathway wound through heavily wooded areas, through several small valleys. It was three miles before the next message brought him to an abrupt stop:

"This is a Porgrave thought broadcaster. It directs you, a true slan, to the little farm ahead, which provides entrance to an underground city comprising factories, gardens and residences. Welcome. This is a Porgrave—"

There was a great bouncing as the car struck a row of small ridges. Soon the machine broke through a thick hedge of yielding willows and emerged into a shallow clearing. Jommy Cross found himself staring across a weed-grown yard to where a weather-beaten farmhouse dropped beside two other age-weary buildings; a barn and a garage.

Windowless, unpainted, the rickety old two-story house gaped sightlessly at him. The barn tottered like the ancient hulk that it was, its roller door hooked on one roller only, and the other end edged deep into the forsaken soil.

His gaze flashed briefly to the garage, then away, then back again thoughtfully. There was the same appearance of something long dead—and yet, somehow, it was different.

The subtle difference grew on him, bringing interest in its wake. The garage seemed to totter, but it was by design, not through decay. There were hard metals here, rigidly set against the elements.

The apparently broken doors leaned heavily against the ground, yet opened lightly before the pressing fingers of the tall, lithely built young woman in a gray dress who came out and gazed at him with a dazzling smile.

She had flashing eyes, this girl, and a finely molded, delicately textured face, and because his mind was always held on a tight band of thought, he came out thinking he was a human being.

And she was a slan!

And he was a slan!

XVII

SIMULTANEOUS discovery! For Jommy Cross, who had searched the world with caution for so many long years, his mind always on the alert, recovery was instantaneous. But for Kathleen, who had never had to conceal her thoughts, the surprise was utter and devastating. She fought for mental control and found herself uncontrollable. The little-used shield was suddenly, briefly, unusable.

There was a noble pride in the rich flow of thought matter that streamed from her mind in that instant when her brain was like an open, unprotected book. Pride, and a golden humility. Humility based on a deep sensitivity, an immense understanding that equaled his own, yet lacked the tempering of unending struggle and danger. There was a warm good-heartedness in her that had nevertheless known resentment and tears, and faced the grim urgency of hate unlimited.

And then her mind closed tight, and she stood there wide-eyed, looking at him. After a long moment she unlocked her mind and let a thought reach out to him:

"We mustn't stay here. I've been here too long already. You probably saw in my mind about the police, so the best thing we can do is to drive away immediately."

He just sat there, gazing at her with shining eyes. Each passing second, his mind expanded more. His whole body felt warm with the richness of pure joy. The sky was blue and cloudless, the sunshine was bright, and all the world was fair!

It was like an intolerable weight lifting. All these years everything had depended on him; the great weapon he held in trust for that future world he sometimes dreamed of, held suspended like a monstrous sword of Damocles over the destiny of human and slan alike by the single, fragile thread of life. And now—there would be two life threads to control it.

It was not a thought, but an emotion; all sad, sweet, glorious emotion. A man and a woman, alone in the world, meeting like this, just as his father and mother had met long ago. He smiled reminiscently and opened his mind wide to her. He shook his head:

"No, not right away. I caught a flash from your mind about the machines in the cave city, and I would like to have a look at them. Heavy machinery is my greatest lack."

He smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry too much about danger. I have some weapons that human beings cannot match, and this car is a very special means of escape. It can go practically anywhere. I hope there is room for it in the cave."

"Oh, yes. First you go down by a

series of elevators. Then you can drive anywhere. But we mustn't delay."

Jommy Cross laughed happily. "No buts!" he said.

Later, Kathleen repeated her doubts: "I really don't think we ought to stay. I can see in your mind about your marvelous weapons, and that your car is made of a metal you call ten-point steel—but you also have a tendency to discount human beings. You mustn't! In their fight against slans, men like John Petty have had their brains keyed to a pitch of abnormal power. And John Petty will stop at nothing to destroy me. Even now his net must be tightening systematically around all the various slan hiding places where I may be."

Jommy Cross stared at her with troubled eyes. Enveloping them was the silence of the cave city; the once-white walls that pushed bravely up to the cracking ceiling; the row on row of pillars, bent and worn more from the weight of years than of the heavy earth that pressed them down.

To his left he could see the beginning of the great expanse of artificial garden and the gleaming underground stream that fed water to this little subworld. To his right stretched the long row of apartment doors, the woodwork still gleaming dully of the old-time "Eternity" varnish.

A people had lived here and had been driven forth by their remorseless enemies, but the menacing atmosphere of that long-ago flight seemed to linger still; his thought answer to Kathleen reflected the grim threat of that lowering danger:

"By all the laws of logic, we have only to be on the alert for outside thoughts and stay within a few hundred yards of my car to be absolutely safe. Yet I am alarmed by your intuition of danger. For intuition, based as it is on the subconscious mind's interpretation of more facts than the conscious mind can grasp at one time, is frequently the only reliable prophet. Please search your brain, as no outsider such as myself can, and try to discover the basis for your fear."

THE girl was silent; her eyes closed; her shield went up. She sat there beside him in the car, looking strangely like a beautiful overgrown child fallen asleep. Finally her sensitive lips twitched; for the first time she spoke aloud:

"Tell me, what is ten-point steel?"

"Ah," said Jommy Cross in satisfaction, "I'm beginning to understand the psychological factors involved. Mental communication has many advantages, but it cannot convey the extent, for instance, of a weapon's power as well as a picture on a piece of paper, or not even as well as by word of mouth. Power, size, strength and similar images do not transmit well."

"Go on."

"Everything I've done," Jommy Cross explained, "has been based on my father's great discovery of the first law of atomic energy-concentration as opposed to the old method of diffusion. So far as I know, father never suspected the metal-strenghening possibilities, but, like all research workers who come after the great man and his basic discovery, I concentrated on details of development, partly based on his ideas, partly on ideas that progressively suggested themselves.

"All metals are held together by atomic tensions, which comprise the theoretical strength of that metal. In the case of steel, I called this theoretical potential one-point. As a comparison, when steel was first invented, its strength was about two thousand-point. New processes rapidly increased this to around one thousand; then, over a period of hundreds of years to the present human level of seven hundred and seventy. Tendrilless slans have made five-hundred-point steel, but even that incredibly hard stuff cannot begin to compare with the product of my application of atomic strain, which changes the very structure of the atoms

and produces the almost perfect ten-point steel.

"An eighth of an inch of ten-point can stop the most powerful explosive shell known to human beings. Unfortunately, it does not stand up so well against the weapons of the tendrilless slans!"

Briefly, he described his attempted trip to the Moon and the mine that sent him scurrying home, badly smashed. He concluded:

"But the important thing to remember is that an electric-energy mine, obviously big enough to blow up a giant battleship, did not actually penetrate a foot of ten-point, though the hull was badly dented and the engine room a shambles from the transmitted shock."

Kathleen was gazing at him, eyes shining. "What a silly fool I am," she breathed. "I've met the greatest living slan and I'm trying to fill him with the fears gathered from twenty-one years of living with human beings and their comparatively infinitesimal powers and forces."

Jommy Cross shook his head smilingly. "Unfortunately, the big shot was not I, but my father—though he had his faults, too, the biggest one being lack of adequate self-protection. But that's true genius for you." The smile faded. "I'm afraid, though, that we'll have to make frequent visits to this cave, and every visit will be just as dangerous as this one. I have met John Petty very briefly, and what I've seen in your mind only adds to a picture of a ruthlessly thorough man. He's bound to keep a watch on this place. But, we cannot allow ourselves to be frightened by such a prospect.

"We'll stay only till dark this time—just long enough for me to examine the machinery. There's some food in the car that we can cook, after I've had a little sleep. I'll sleep in the car, of course. But first, the machinery!"

EVERYWHERE the big machines sprawled, like corpses, silent and moldering. Blast furnaces, great stamping machines, lathes, saws, countless engined tools—a half mile of row on tight row of machines, about thirty percent completely out of commission, twenty percent partially useless, and the rest usable up to a point.

The unwinking, glareless lights made a shadowed world as they wandered along the valley of broken floor in and out among the machine hills. Jommy Cross was thoughtful.

"There's more here than I imagined—everything I have always needed. I can build a great battleship with the scrap metal alone. Not understanding this machinery or how to use it, human beings employ it only as a slan trap." His thought narrowed on her mind: "Tell me, you're sure there are only two entrances to this city?"

"There were only two entrances given on the list in Kier Gray's desk—and I've located no others."

He was silent, but he did not conceal the tenor of his thoughts from her: "Foolish of me to think again of your intuition, but I don't like to let a possible menace out of mind till I've examined every possibility."

"If there is a secret entrance," Kathleen volunteered, "it would take us hours to find it. Also if we found one, we couldn't be sure there wouldn't be others; and so we'd feel no safer. I still believe we should leave immediately."

Jommy Cross shook his head decisively. "I didn't let you see this in my mind before, but the main reason I don't want to leave here is that, until your face is disguised and your tendrills hidden by false hair—a really heart-breaking difficult job—this is the safest place for both of us. Every highway is being watched by the police. Most of them don't know they're looking for a slan, but they have your picture. I turned off the main road in the first place rather than run the risk of being stopped."

"Your machine also can fly, can't it?"

Kathleen asked.

Jommy Cross smiled mirthlessly. "Yes. But if we took to the air, it's seven hours yet till dark; and every other minute we'd run into a plane. Imagine what the pilots would radio to the nearest military airport when they saw an automobile flying through the air. Yet, if we go higher—say fifty miles—we'll surely be seen by a tendrilless slan patrol ship. The first commander will realize instantly who it is, report our positions, and attack. I've got the weapons to destroy him, but I won't be able to destroy the dozens of ships that might follow—at least not before potent forces strike this car so hard that concussion alone will kill us.

"And besides, I cannot willfully put myself in a position where I may have to kill anybody. I've only killed three men in my life; and every day since then my reluctance to destroy human beings has grown until now it is one of the strongest forces in me—so strong that I have based my whole plan for finding the true slans on an analysis of that one dominant trait."

The girl's thought brushed his mind, light as a breath of air. "You have a plan for finding the true slans?" she questioned.

He nodded. "Yes. It's really very simple. All the true slans I have ever met—my father, my mother, myself, and now you—have been good-hearted, kindly people. This in spite of human hatred, human efforts to destroy us. I cannot believe that we four are exceptions; and therefore there must be some reasonable explanation of all the monstrous acts which true slans seem to be committing."

He smiled laconically. "It's probably presumptuous of me even to have a thought on the subject at my age and limited development. Anyway, I'm afraid it's been an utter failure so far. And the laws of logic tell me that I mustn't make a major move in the game until I've reached slan maturity eleven years from now."

Kathleen's eyes were fixed on him. She nodded agreement. "I can see, too," she said, "why we must stay here another seven hours."

Queerly, he wished she hadn't brought up that subject again. Because, for the barest moment—he hid the thought from her—a premonition of a black, impending danger flashed into him. So incredible did it seem that logic smashed it aside. The vague backwash of it that remained made him say:

"Just stay near the car and keep your mind alert. After all, we can spot a human being a quarter of a mile away even while we're sleeping."

Oddly enough, it didn't sound the slightest bit reassuring.

XVIII

NERVES taut, at first Jommy Cross only dozed. He must have been partly awake for some minutes, because though his eyes were closed he was aware of her mind near him, and that she was reading one of his books. Once, so light was his sleep, the question came into his mind:

"The ceiling lights—do they stay on all the time?"

She must have reached softly into his brain with the answer, for suddenly he knew that the lights had been on ever since he came, and must have been like that for hundreds of years.

There must have been a question in her mind, for his brain made an otherwise unwarranted answer: "No, I won't eat until I've had some sleep."

Or was that just a memory of something previously spoken?

Still he wasn't quite asleep, for a queer, glad thought welled up from deep inside him: It was wonderful to have found another slan at last, such a gorgeously beautiful girl.

And such a fine-looking young man.

Was that his thought or hers, he wondered sleepily.

It was mine, Jommy.

What a rich joy it was to be able to

entwine your mind with another sympathetic brain so intimately that the two streams of thought seemed one; and question and answer and all discussion included instantly all the subtle overtones that the cold medium of words could never transmit.

Were they in love? How could two people simply meet and be in love when, for all they knew, there were millions of slans in the world, among whom might be scores of other men and women they might have chosen under other conditions?

It's more than that, Jommy. All our lives we've been alone in a world of alien men. To find kindred at last is a special joy; and meeting all the slans in the world afterward will not be the same. We're going to share hopes and doubts, dangers and victories. Above all, we will create a child. You see, Jommy, I have already adjusted my whole being to a new way of living. Is that not true love?

He thought it was, and was conscious of great happiness. But when he slept, the happiness seemed no longer there—only a blackness that became an abyss down which he was peering into illimitable depths.

He awakened with a start; his narrowed, alert eyes flashing to where Kathleen had been sitting. The seat was empty. His sharpened mind, still in the thrall of his dream, reached out.

"Kathleen!"

Kathleen's cheerful thought came immediately: "I'm here, in the kitchen. As soon as I saw you were going to waken, I collected some of your canned goods, and they're now on the stove."

From where his car was parked, he could see down the line of apartment doors to the archway that led into the great community kitchens. Two hundred yards. That was all right.

"Okay!" his mind said. "I'll be right there."

He was climbing toward the steering wheel when her next thought came, on a strange, high, urgent vibration:

"Jommy—the wall's opening! Somebody—"

Abruptly her own thought broke off and she was transmitting a man's words:

" 'Well, if it isn't Kathleen,' John Petty was saying in cold satisfaction. 'And only the fifty-seventh hide-out I've visited. I've been to all of them personally, of course, because few other humans could keep their minds from warning you of their approach, and besides, nobody could safely be trusted with such an important assignment. What do you think of the psychology of building these secret entrances to the kitchen? Apparently even slans travel on their stomachs.' "

Beneath Jommy Cross' swift fingers, the car leaped forward, toward the spot where Kathleen and John Petty were standing. He caught Kathleen's reply, cool and unhurried:

"So you've found me, Mr. Petty—" mockingly. "Am I, then, to beseech your mercy?"

The icy answer streamed through her mind to Jommy Cross: " 'Mercy is not my strong point. Nor do I delay when a long-awaited opportunity offers.' "

"Jommy, quick!"

The shot echoed from her mind to his. For a terrible moment of intolerable strain, her mind held off the death that the crashing bullet in her brain brought.

"Oh, Jommy, and we could have been so happy. Good-by, my dearest—"

In a desperate dismay, he followed the life force as it faded in a flash from her mind. The blackout wall of death suddenly barred his mind from that that had been Kathleen's. . . .

THERE was no thought in Jommy Cross, no hate, no grief, no hope—only his mind receiving impressions—and his superlatively responsive body reacting like the perfect physical machine it was.

His car braked to a stop. He saw the figure of John Petty standing just be-

yond Kathleen's crumpled body.

"By Heaven!" snapped from the surface of the man's mind. "Another of them!"

His gun flashed against the impregnable armor of the car. Startled by his failure, the chief of secret police drew back. His lips parted in a snarl of fearless rage. For a moment, the dark hatred of man for the encroaching slan enemy seemed personified in his grim, merciless countenance, and in the straining tenseness as he awaited death.

One touch on one button and he would have been blasted into nothingness. But Jommy Cross made no move, spoke no word. Colder, harder grew his mind, as he sat there, his bleak gaze stared impersonally at the man, then at the dead body. Finally the measured thought came that the possessor of atomic energy could have no heart, no love, no normal life. In all the world of men and slans who hated so savagely, there was for him only the relentless urgency of his high destiny.

Other men began pouring from the secret entrance—men with machine guns that chattered futiley at his car—and among them he was abruptly aware of the shield that indicated the presence of two tendrilless slans.

His searching eyes spotted one of them after a moment, as the man drew into a corner, and whispered a swift message into a wrist radio. The words ran plainly along the surface of his mind, as they gave a detailed description of him and his car.

He could have smashed them all, the whole venial, ghoulish crew—but no thought of vengeance could penetrate the chilled, transcendental region that was his brain. In this mad Universe, there was only the safety of his weapons and the certainties that went with it.

His car backed, raced off with a speed their legs could not match. Ahead was the tunnel of the underground creek that fed the gardens. He plunged into it, his disintegrators widening Nature's crude bed for half a mile—then he turned down to let the water stream after him and his tunnel; then up, so that the water wouldn't have too much space to fill.

Finally, he leveled off, and plunged on through the darkness of the underground. Not yet could he head for the surface, for the tendrilless slans would have their cruisers waiting to meet just such a possibility.

Black clouds hid a night world when, at last, Jommy Cross emerged from the side of a hill. He paused, and with meticulous care, undercut his tunnel, buried it under tons of crashing earth —and soared into the sky. For the second time, he clicked on his tendrilless slan radio; and this time a man's voice broke into the car:

"—Kier Gray has now arrived and taken possession of the body. It appears that once again the snake organization has allowed one of its own kind to be destroyed without a move to save her, without even the sign of a move.

"The unexpected appearance of Cross on the scene today was, therefore, one great advantage we gained from the affair. We have a description of his car and an expert's description of his physique. No matter how he disguises himself, he cannot change the bony structure of his face; and even immediate destruction of his car will not destroy the record of the car itself. There were only a few hundred thousand of that particular model sold. His will have been stolen, but it can be traced.

"Joanna Hillory, who has made a very detailed study of this snake, has been placed in charge of the search for Cross."

The chill, rushing air whined and whistled against the hurtling car there beneath the swarming black clouds. The search for him was on. They would find him, of course, these thoroughgoing slans. They had failed once because of an unknown quantity—his weapon—but that was known now. Besides it was not a factor that could in-

fluence their remorseless hunt. His steel-hard mind contemplated that prospective invasion of his valley; and finally emerged with one fact that remained in his favor, one question: Yes, they would find him, but how long would it take?

IT TOOK seven years. Jommy Cross had been twenty-six for two months on the tremendous day when the tendrilless slan organization struck with unexpected, unimaginable violence.

It was hot with a sultry, oppressive heat as he came slowly down the veranda steps and paused on the pathway that divided the garden. He was thinking with a quiet, gentle thought of Kathleen, and of his long-dead mother and father. It was not grief, or even sadness that swayed him, but a deep, philosophical sense of the profound tragedy of life.

But no introspection could dull his senses. With abnormal, unhuman clarity he was aware of his surroundings. Of all the developments in himself during those seven years, it was this marvelous perception of anything that marked his growth toward maturity.

Nothing escaped him. Heat waves danced against the lower reaches of the mountain twenty miles away, where his spaceship was hidden. But no heat mist could bar a vision that saw so many more pictures per split second than the human eye could see. Details penetrated, a hard, bright pattern formed where a few years before there would have been even for himself, a blur.

A squadron of midges swarmed past Granny, where she knelt by a flower bed. A faint life wave of the tiny flies caressed the supersentitive receptors of his brain.

Men and women at work, children at play, laughter; tractors moving, trucks, cars—a little farm community meeting another day in the old, old fashion.

He stared again at Granny. Briefly, his mind dissolved into her defenseless brain, and in that instant, so utter was his power of receiving thoughts, it was as if she were another part of his body. A crystal-clear picture of the dark earth she was looking at flashed from her mind to his. A tall flower, directly under her gaze, loomed big in her mind, and in his.

As he watched, her hand came into view, holding a small, black bug. Triumph squirmed a course through her brain as, with a sharp squeeze, she squashed the insect, then complacently wiped her stained fingers in the dirt.

"Granny!" Cross ejaculated, "can't you suppress your murderous instincts?"

The old lady glanced up at him. There was a belligerent thrust in her wrinkled, kindly face that was distinctly reminiscent of the old Granny.

"Nonsense!" she snapped. "The little devils eat up the plants."

Her giggle sounded senile. Cross frowned faintly. Granny had thrived physically in this semitropical, West coast climate, but he was not altogether satisfied with his hypnotic reconstruction of her mind. She was very old of course, but her constant use of certain phrases, such as the one about what she, and her mother before her, had done, was too mechanical. He had impressed the idea upon her in the first place to fill the enormous gap left by the uprooting of her evil memories but—Well, one of these days he'd have to try again.

He started to turn away; and it was at the moment that the warning tingled into his brain, a sharp pulsing of faraway outside thoughts. "Airplanes!" people were thinking. "So many planes!"

YEARS had passed since Jommy Cross had implanted the hypnotic suggestions that everybody who saw anything unusual in the valley was to signal through their subconscious, without themselves being aware of the act. The fruits of that precaution came now in the wave after wave of warning from dozens of minds.

Now he saw the planes, specks diving over the mountain heading in his general direction; and like a striking mongoose, his mind lashed out toward them, reaching for the minds of the pilots. Taut-held brain shields of tendrilless slans met that one lingering, searching glance.

He leaped forward in a single, flowing movement. In full racing stride he snatched Granny from the ground. An instant later he was in the house. The ten-point steel door of that ten-point steel house swung shut—even as a great, glistening helicopter plane settled like a gigantic bird of prey among the flowers of Granny's garden.

Cross thought tensely: "A plane in every farm yard. That means they don't know exactly which one I'm in. But now the spaceships will arrive to finish the job. Thorough!"

Well, so had he been thorough. It was obvious that, now his hand was forced, he must push his own plan to the utmost limit, and with the uttermost determination. He was conscious of supreme confidence. There was still not a doubt in him. He had been too careful to doubt anything.

Doubt and dismay came sharply a minute later, as he stared into his underground visiplate. The battleships and cruisers were there all right, but something else, too—another ship. A ship!

The monster filled half the visiplate, and its wheel-shaped bulk sprawled across the lower quarter of the sky. A half mile circle of ship, ten million tons of metal, floating down lighter than air, like a buoyant flattened baloon gigantic, immeasurably malignant in its sheer threat of unlimited power. Down, and then—

It came alive! A hundred-yard beam of white fire flared from its massive wall—and the solid top of the mountain dissolved before that frightful thrust. His mountain, where his ship—his life—was hidden, destroyed by atomic energy!

XIX

MOTIONLESS, Cross stood quite still there on the rug of the steel floor of that steel laboratory. Wisps of human incoherency from every direction fumbled at his brain. He flung up his mind shield and that distracting confusion of outside thought was cut off abruptly. Behind him, Granny moaned in gentle terror. In the distance above him, sledge hammer blows were lashing at his impregnable cottage, but the dim bedlam of noise touched him not. He stood there, in a world of personal silence, a world of swift, quiet, uninterrupted thought.

Atomic energy! If they had it, too, why did they bother him? A thousand co-ordinating thoughts leaped up to form the simple answer: They didn't have his perfect type of atomic energy, only a crude development of the old type cyclotron. That alone could explain so much size.

A ten-million-ton-cyclotron, capable of a wild and deadly spray of energy—and by God, he'd have to hurry or they'd have him!

Muscles galvanized, his mind shield went down. He laughed coldly, and leaped toward the great instrument board that spread across the entire end of the laboratory.

A switch clicked, pointers set rigid. Dancing needles told the story of his spaceship out there under that dissolving mountain—the spaceship which they were obviously trying to destroy, to prevent his escape. But now the needles told of a ship aflame with life from nose to stern, a great machine automatically burrowing deeper into the ground, and at the same time heading unerringly toward this laboratory.

A dial spun. A whole bank of needles in their transparent cases danced from zero to the first fractional point, and wavered there; and they, too, told a story. The story of glittering atomic projectors rearing up from the ground where they had been hidden so long;

and as he grasped the precision instrument that was his aiming device, twenty invincible guns out there swung in perfect synchronization.

The hairline sights swung along the unmissable spread of that ship's bulk. Abruptly, then, for a bare instant, he hesitated. What was his purpose against these ruthless enemies?

After all, he didn't want to bring that monster machine to Earth. He didn't want to create a situation where slans and humans might launch into a furious war for the possession of the wreck. There was no doubt that the human beings would fight with fearless ferocity. Their great mobile guns could still hurl shells capable of piercing any metal in possession of the slans. If any of those ships with their superior armaments ever fell into human hands, then it would be no time at all before they, too, had spaceships; and the devil's war would be on. No, he didn't want that.

And he didn't want to destroy the ship because he didn't want to kill the tendrilless slans who were in it. For after all, tendrilless slans did represent a law and order, which he respected. Because they were a great race, and definitely kindred to him, they merited mercy.

BEFORE that clarification, hesitation fled. Straight at the roaring center of that immense cyclotron, Cross aimed his battery of synchronized weapons—his thumb pressed down the fire button.

Above him, the half mile of spiral-shaped ship recoiled like an elephant struck an intolerable blow. It rocked madly, like a ship in stormy seas; and briefly, as it swung sickeningly, he saw blue sky through a gaping hole—and realized his victory.

He had cut that vast spiral from end to end. In every turn of it was not a hopelessly diffusing leak. No stream of atoms, however, accelerant, could run that gauntlet unmutilated. The power of the cyclotron was smashed.

But all the implications of that immense ship remained. Frowning, Cross watched the ship poise for a moment shakily. Slowly it began to recede, it's antigravity plates apparently full on. Up, up it mounted, its size yielding with reluctance to the fading effects of distance.

At fifty miles, it was still bigger than the battleships that were nosing down toward that still green, still unharmed valley—and now the implications were clearer, colder, deadlier.

Their possession of atomic energy, however crude, proved they must have instruments for detecting the presence of a machine using it anywhere! He had such instruments. They must have them.

Their instruments, poor though they must be—lacking as they did the minus energy principle—must have spotted his valley months ago.

Which meant they had waited until they could attack in one titanic, organized battle—with the one purpose of forcing him out where they could follow him night and day by means of their instruments, and by sheer weight of numbers and weight of guns, destroy him!

Dispassionately, Cross turned to Granny: "I'm going to leave you here. Follow my instructions to the letter: Five minutes from now, you will go up the way we came down, closing all the metal doors behind you. You will then forget all about this laboratory—every inch of it is going to be destroyed, so you might as well forget! If men question you, you will be senile, but at other times you will be normal.

"I'm leaving you to face that danger because I'm no longer sure, in spite of my precautions, that I can come out of this alive."

He felt a chill, impersonal interest in the knowledge that the day of action had arrived. The tendrilless slans might intend this attack on him to be but part of a vaster design that included their long-delayed assault on Earth. Whatever happened, his plans were as complete as he could make them. Though it was four years too soon, he must now

force the issue to the limit of his power. He was on the run; and there could be no turning back—for behind him was swift death!

LIKE an arrow Cross' ship nosed out of the little river and launched toward space on a long, slanting climb. It was important that he not go invisible until the slans actually saw that he was out of the valley before they razed it in mad, futile search. But first—one thing he must do.

His hand plunged home a switch; his narrowed gaze fastened on the rear visiplate, that showed the valley falling away below. At a score of points on that green floor—he counted them in lightning calculation—white flame blazed up a strange, splotchy-looking fire.

Down there, every weapon, every atomic machine, was turning on itself in a fury of destruction. Fire chambers were burning out, metal running molten in that devouring violence of tormented energy.

The white glow was still there, as he turned away a few seconds later, grimly content. Now, let them search through that ravaged, twisted metal. Let their scientists labor to bring life to a secret they craved so desperately, and to obtain which they had come out where human beings could see some of their powers. In every burned-out-cache in that valley, they would find—exactly nothing!

The destruction of all that was so precious to the attackers required a fraction of a minute, but in that moment of time he was seen. Four dead-black battleships turned toward him simultaneously—and then hovered uncertainly as he actuated the mechanism that made his vessel invisible.

He sped on faster, faster, to take advantage of their confusion. Abruptly, their possession of atom-energy detectors was shown. The ships fell in behind him unerringly. Alarm bells showed others ahead, closing toward him.

It was the unmatchable atomic drivers that saved him from that vast fleet, so many vessels that he could not even begin to count them. And all that could come near turned their deadly projectors where their detector instruments pointed. They missed because the instant they spotted him, his machine flashed out of the range of their most massive guns. All the driving strength of their crowded rockets had no chance against the full-driven thrust of the energy of energies.

Completely invisible, traveling at miles and miles per second, his ship headed for Mars! He must have struck mines, but that didn't matter now. The devouring disintergration rays that poured out from the walls of his great machine ate up mines before they could explode. Simultaneously the rays destroyed every light-wave that would have revealed his craft to alert eyes out there in the all-pervading, scorching blaze of Sun.

There was only one difference. The mines were smashed before they reached his ship. Light, being in a wave state as it flashed up, could only be destroyed during that fraction of instant when it touched his ship and started to bounce. At the moment of bouncing, its speed reduced, the oscillations that basically composed it, lengthened according to the laws of the Lorenz-Fitz-Gerald contraction theory—at the instant of quiescence, the fury of the solar rays was blotted out by the powerful disintergrators.

Because light must touch the walls first, and so could be absorbed as readily as ever, his visiplats were unaffected. The full picture of everything came through even as he hurtled on, unseen, invisible.

His ship seemed to stand still in the void, except that gradually Mars became larger. At a million miles, it was a great, glowing ball as big as the Moon seen from Earth. It grew like an expanding balloon until its dark bulk filled half the sky, and lost its redness.

CONTINENTS took form, mountains, seas, incredible gorges, rock-strewn and barren stretches of flat land; grimmer grew the picture; deadlier every forsaken aspect of that gnarled old planet.

Mars, seen through an electric telescope at thirty thousand miles, was like a too-old human being, withered, bony, ugly, cold-looking, drooling with age, enormously repellent.

The dark area that was Mare Cimmerium showed as a fanged, terrible sea. Silent, almost tideless, the waters lay under the eternal blue-dark skies. But no ship could ever breast those murderously placid waters. Endless miles of jagged rocks broke the surface. There were no patterns, no channels—simply a jangled incoherence of deadly sea that shared mile on mile with remorseless rock.

Finally, Cross saw the city, making a strange, shimmering picture under its vast roof of glass. Next a second city showed, and a third.

Far, far past Mars he plunged, every motor dead, not a fraction of atomic energy diffusing from any part of his ship. This was caution pure and simple. There could be no fear of detector instruments in these vast distances. At last, the gravitational field of the planet began to check that mad flight. Slowly the long machine yielded to the inexorable pull and began to fall toward the night side of the globe.

It was a slow business. Finally he turned on—not his atomic energy—but the antigravity plates which he had not used since he had installed his atomic drives.

For hours then, while centrifugal action of the planet cushioned his swift fall, he sat without sleep, staring into the visiplates. Five times the ugly balls of dark metal that were mines flashed toward him; each time he actuated his all-devouring wall disintegrators—and waited for the ships that might have spotted this momentary use of that devastating force.

A dozen times, his alarm bells clanged, and lights flashed on his visiplates, but no ships came within range.

Below him, the planet grew vast, and filled the horizon with its dark immensity. There were not many landmarks on this night portion, aside from the cities. Here and there, however, splashes of light showed some kind of habitation and activity. At last he found what he wanted—a mere dot of flame, like a candle fluttering in remote darkness. He landed the ship not far away from the beacon.

It turned out to be a small mine. The light came from a bunk house where lived the four tendrilless slans who guarded the mine's automatic machinery. It was almost dawn before Cross returned to his ship, satisfied that this was what he wanted.

A mist of blackness lay like a black cloth over the planet the following night when, once again, Cross landed his ship in the ravine that led toward the mine head.

Not a shadow stirred ahead of him, not a sound invaded the silence as he edged forward to the mouth of the mine. Gingerly, he took out one of the metal cases which protected his hypnotism crystals, inserted the atomically unstable, glasslike object into a crack of the rock entrance—jerked off the metal covering and raced off before his own body could affect the sluggish thing. In the black of the ravine, he waited.

In twenty minutes, a door in the bunk house opened; the flood of light from within revealed the outlines of a tall young man. Then the door closed. A torch blazed in the hand of the shadowed figure, glared along the path he was following—and brought a flash of reflected flame from the "hypnotism" crystal.

The man walked toward it curiously, and stopped to examine it. His thought ran along the surface of his casually protected mind:

"Funny! That crystal wasn't there this morning." He shrugged. "Some

rock probably jarred loose; and the crystal was behind it."

He stared at it, abruptly startled by its fascination. Suspicion leaped into his alert mind. He pondered the thing with a cold, tense logic—and dived for the shelter of the cavern as Cross' paralyzing ray flicked at him from the ravine. He fell unconscious just inside the cave.

QUICKLY Cross rushed forward. In a few minutes he had the man far down the ravine, out of earshot from the camp. But even during those first minutes, his brain was reaching through the other's shattered mind shield, searching.

It was slow work, because moving around in an unconscious mind was like walking under water; there was so much resistance. Soon he found what he wanted, the corridor made by the man's sharp awareness of the pattern of the crystal.

Swiftly, Cross followed the mind path to its remote end in the complex root sources of the brain. A thousand paths streamed loosely before him, scattering in every direction. Grimly with careful yet desperate speed, he followed them, ignoring the obviously impossible ones. Then like a burglar who opens safes by listening for the faint click that reveals the combination—once more a key corridor stretched before him.

Eight key paths, fifteen minutes; and the combination was his, the brain was his. Under his ministrations the man, whose name was Miller, revived with a gasp. Instantly, he closed the shield tight over his mind.

Cross snapped: "Don't be so illogical. Lower your shield."

The shield went down. In the darkness the surprised tendrilless slan stared at him. Astonishment flamed through his mind.

"Hypnotized, by heaven!" he said wonderingly. "How the dévil did you do it?"

"The method can be used only by true slans," Cross replied coldly, "so explanations would be idle."

"A true slan!" the other said slowly. "Then you're Cross!"

"I'm Cross."

"I suppose you know what you're doing," Miller went on, "but I don't see how you expect to gain anything by your control of me."

XX

PERHAPS Miller realized the strangeness of the conversation there in that dark ravine, under the black, mist-hidden sky. Only one of the two moons of Mars was visible, a blurred, white shape that gleamed remotely from the vast vault of heaven. He said quickly:

"How is it that I can talk to you, reason with you? I thought hypnotism was a mind-dulling process."

"Hypnotism," Cross cut in without pausing in this swift exploration of the other's brain, "is a science that involves many factors. But there is no time to waste." His voice grew sharper. "Tomorrow is your day off. You will go to the Bureau of Statistics and ascertain the name and present location of every man with my physical structure."

Miller began to laugh softly. His mind and voice said: "Good heavens, man, I can tell you that right now. They were all spotted after your description came through seven years ago. There are twenty-seven men altogether, who resemble you in great detail. One of them is married to a woman whose head was smashed in a spaceship accident last week. They're building up her brain and bone again but—"

"But that'll take a few weeks," Cross finished for him. "The man's name is Barton Corliss. He's stationed at the Cimmerium spaceship factory."

"There ought to be a law," Miller said glumly, "against people who can read minds. Fortunately, the Porgrave receivers will spot you."

"Eh?" Cross spoke sharply.

Calmly, Miller said: "The Porgrave

broadcaster broadcasts thoughts, and the Porgrave receiver receives them. In Cimmerium there's one located every few feet. They're our protection against snake spies."

Cross was silent. At last he said: "How imminent is the attack on Earth?"

"It has been decided," Miller replied precisely, "that in view of the failure to destroy you and obtain your secret, control of Earth has become essential. Vast reserves of spaceships are being turned out. The fleet is mobilizing at key points. But the date of attack has not yet been announced."

"What have they planned to do with human beings?"

"To hell with human beings!" Miller said coolly. "We can't worry about them."

The darkness all around seemed deeper, the chill of the night beginning to penetrate even his heated clothes. Instant by instant, Cross' mind grew harder as he examined the implications of Miller's words. War! In a bleak voice, he said:

"Only with the help of the true slans can that attack be stopped; and there are two places left that they can be—and I'm going to the most probable place."

* * * * *

The bleak morning dragged. The Sun gleamed in the blue-black vastness of the sky. The sharp, black shadows that it cast on the strange, deadly land grew narrow, and then began to lengthen again as Mars turned her unfriendly afternoon face to the stark, insistent light.

From where Cross' ship perched in the great chalk cliff, the horizon was a thing of blurred ridges against the shadowed sky. But even from this two-thousand-foot height, the nearness of the horizon was markedly noticeable.

By twilight, his long, patient vigil was rewarded. The small, red-striped torpedo-shaped plane drifted up from the horizon, fire pouring from its rear. The rays of the sinking Sun glinted on its dull, metallic skin; it darted far to the left of where Cross waited in his machine that, like some beast of prey, lay entunneled in the swelling breast of the white cliff.

He made swift adjustments. Then the force of the magnetors flashed across the miles—and, simultaneously, the idea he had developed during his long trip from Earth took life from a special engine. Radio waves so similar to the vibrations of atomic energy that only an extremely sensitive instrument could have detected the difference, sprayed forth from a robot motor that he had set up five hundred miles away. For those brief minutes, the whole planet sighed with atomic energy waves.

Swiftly, yet gently, the magnetors did their work. The faraway, still receding ship slowed as if it had run into an elastic net that yielded ever more stubbornly; and finally, the deceleration completed, flung its prey toward the chalk cliff.

Effortlessly, using the radio waves as screen for further use of power, Cross withdrew his own ship deeper into the cliff's bulging belly, widening the natural tunnel with a spray of dissolving energy. Then like a spider with a fly, pulled the smaller machine into the lair after him.

He could have sliced the craft into a dozen sections, carved himself out a score of doors, sheared off the rocket jets, and so have gained access. But he needed the ship intact. He waited.

In a moment a door opened and a man appeared in it. He leaped lightly to the tunnel floor, and stood for a moment peering against the glare of the searchlight of the other ship. With easy confidence, he walked closer. It was now that his eyes caught the gleam of the crystal in the dank earthly wall of the cave.

He glanced at it casually, then the very abnormality of a thing that could

distract his attention even for a second penetrated to his consciousness. With deliberate action, he plucked it out of the wall—and Cross' paralyzing ray sent him sprawling.

INSTANTLY, Cross clicked off all power. A switch closed; and the distant robot-atomic wave broadcaster dissolved in the fire of its own energy.

As for the man, all he wanted from him this time was a full-length photograph, a record of his voice, the hypnotic control. It required only twenty minutes before Corliss was flying off again toward Cimmerium, inwardly raging against his enslavement, but unable to do anything about it.

There could be no hurrying of what Cross knew he must do before he could dare enter Cimmerium. Everything had to be anticipated, an almost unlimited amount of detail painstakingly worked out. Every fourth day—his holiday—Corliss called at the cave, going and coming, and as the urgent weeks fled, his mind was drained of memory, of detail.

Finally, Cross was ready — and the next, the seventh holiday, his plan came to life. One Barton Corliss remained in the cave, deep in hypnotic sleep; the other one climbed into the small, red-striped craft and sped toward the city of Cimmerium.

It was twenty minutes later that the battleship flashed down from the sky, and loomed up beside the plane.

"Corliss," said a man's clipped voice in the ship's radio, "in the course of normal observation of all slans resembling the snake, Jommy Cross, we waited for you at this point, and find that you are approximately five minutes overdue.

"You will accordingly proceed to Cimmerium under escort, where you will be taken before the military commission for examination. That is all."

Catastrophe can be as simple as that. An accident not altogether unexpected, but bitterly disappointing none the less. Six times before, Barton Corliss had been as much as twenty minutes overdue, and it had gone undetected. Now five minutes of equally unavoidable delay—and the long arm of chance had struck at the hope of a world.

Gloomily, Cross stared into the visiplates as he mentally assayed his ravaged position. Below him was this trackless waste—his way out, if ever he desired to escape. But no plane, such as this red striped ship, could hope to run the gantlet that the tendrilless slans could throw up between himself and his own indestructible machine, buried deep in that distant cliff.

Some hope remained, of course. He had an atomic revolver, built to resemble Corliss' gun and which actually fired an electric charge — until the secret mechanism for the atomic energy blast was activated. And the wedding ring on his finger was as near a copy as he could make of the one that Corliss wore, the great difference being that it contained the smallest atomic generator ever constructed; and was designed, like the gun, to dissolve if tampered with. Two weapons and a dozen crystals—to stop the war of wars!

Wilder now, grew the land that fled beneath his prison ship. Black, placid water began to show in oily, dirty streaks at the bottom of those primeval abysses, the beginning of the unclean, unbeautiful sea that was Mare Cimmerium.

Abruptly, there was unnatural life!

On a tableland of mountain to his right reposed a cruiser, like a great, browsing black shark. A swarm of hundred-foot gunboats lay motionless on the rock around it, a wicked-looking school of deep-space fish. Soon the mountain became a steel and stone fortress, with gigantic guns peering into the sky.

The guns grew thicker. Always they pointed into the sky, as if waiting tensely for some momentarily expected and monstrously dangerous enemy.

A hundred miles of forts and guns

and ships! A hundred miles of impassable gorge and water and frightful, upjutting cliffs.

Finally his ship and the great armored vessel, that was his escort, soared over a spreading peak; and there in the near distance glittered the glass city of Cimmerium. The hour of his examination had come.

THE CITY rode high on a plain that shrank back from the ragged edge of the sea. The glass roofs flashed in the Sun, a burning white fire that darted over the surface in dazzling, vivid bursts of flame.

It was not a big city. Its widest part was three miles across. Yet in its confines dwelt two hundred thousand slans. The figures were according to Miller and Corliss.

Cross saw a landing field, big enough to take a battleship. It was streaked with shining threads of railway. Lightly, his small machine settled toward one of the tracks onto metal cradle Number 9977. Simultaneously, the great bulk of warship above him surged off toward the sea, and was instantly lost to sight as it passed the towering cliff-edge of glasslike roof.

Below him, the automatic machinery of the cradle rolled on its twin rolls toward a great steel door. The door opened automatically, and shut behind him. There must have been a thousand ships in the section of the vast hangar that he could see. From roof to ceiling, they were packed in like sardines, each on its cradle; and each—he knew—capable of being called forth if the proper numbers were punched on the section instrument board.

The machine stopped. Cross climbed down and nodded to the three slans who waited there for him. The oldest looking of the three came forward, smiling faintly.

"Well, Barton, so you've earned another examination! You may be sure of a swift, thorough job — the usual, of course: Fingerprinting, X ray, blood test, chemical reaction of the skin, microscope measurement of hair, and so on."

There was a dark expectancy to the overtone of thought that leaked from the minds of the three men. But Cross did not need their thoughts. He had never been more alert.

"Since when has chemical reactions of the skin been a usual part of the examination?" he asked.

The men did not apologize for their little trap, nor did their thoughts show any disappointment at failure. And Cross felt no thrill at this first small victory.

The youngest man said: "Bring him into the laboratory and we'll get the physical part of this examination over. Take his gun, Prentice."

Cross handed over the weapon.

They waited then; the oldest man, Ingraham, smiling expectantly; Bradshaw, the youngest, stared at him with unwinking gray eyes. Prentice alone looked indifferent as he pocketed Cross' gun.

XXI

QUITE amused at the way they were watching him for the slightest error of procedure, Cross led the way to the exit. It opened onto a shining corridor, the smooth walls of which were spaced at intervals with closed doors. When they were within sight of entrance to the laboratory, Cross said:

"I suppose you called the hospital in time, telling them I would be delayed."

Ingraham stopped short, and the others followed suit. They stared at him. Ingraham said: "Good heaven, is your wife being revived this morning?"

Unsmiling, Cross nodded. "The doctors were to have her on the verge of consciousness twenty minutes after I was due to land. At that time they will have been working for approximately an hour. Your examination and that of the military commission will obviously have to be postponed."

There was no disagreement. Ingraham said: "The military will escort you, no doubt."

It was Bradshaw who spoke briefly into his wrist radio. The tiny, yet clear, answer reached to Cross. The speaker said:

"Under ordinary circumstances, the military patrol would escort him to the hospital. But it happens that we are confronted by the most dangerous individual the world has ever known. Cross is only twenty-six, but we can assume that we are dealing with a full-grown true slan, possessed of weapons and powers beyond compare.

"If Corliss should actually be Cross, Mrs. Corliss' return to consciousness may reveal him. Our examination of men resembling Cross requires that experts be with him every second of the time. You will, therefore, carry on until further orders. A surface car is waiting at the head of elevator Number One."

As they emerged into the street, Bradshaw said: "If he is not Corliss, Mrs. Corliss' mind will be permanently injured."

Ingraham shook his head. "You're mistaken. True slans can read minds. He'll be able to do as good a job of sensing errors of the surgical room as Corliss with the aid of the Porgrave receivers—"

Cross caught the grim smile on Bradshaw's face, as the slan said softly: "A psychological affinity that develops over a period of years between a husband and wife. Mrs. Corliss will recognize instantly whether or not he is her husband."

Ingraham was smiling grimly. "If Corliss is Cross, the revival of Mrs. Corliss, in his presence, may have tragic results for her. That alone will settle his identity."

Cross said nothing. The Porgrave receivers constituted unmistakable danger, but they were only machines. Absolute care, together with his superlative control over his mind, should reduce that constant menace.

Recognition by Mrs. Corliss was another matter. Affinity between a sensitive husband and his sensitive wife was easily understandable. It was unthinkable that he should destroy this slan woman's mind. Somehow he must save her sanity!

Clearly, he saw that the danger was enormous, and, worse still, it was immediate.

THE CAR sped smoothly along a boulevard that glowed with flowers. The road was dark, glassy in appearance, and not straight. It wound in and out among the tall, spreading trees that framed the buildings lining the far sides of the shaded walks to the left and right.

The buildings were low-built structures, and their beauty—the flowing artistry of their design—brought him genuine surprise. He had captured something of the picture they made from the minds of Miller and Corliss, but this triumph of architectural genius was beyond his anticipation. A fortress is not expected to be beautiful.

Once again the vastness of the defense forces showed with what respect the true slans were viewed. A world of men was going to be attacked because of the tendrilless slans' fear—and that was the ultimate in fantastic, tragic irony.

If I'm right, Cross thought, and the true slans are actually living in with the tendrilless slans, as the tendrilless slans in their turn live with the human beings, then all this preparation is against an enemy that has already slipped inside the defenses.

The car stopped in an alcove that led to an elevator. The elevator dropped as swiftly into the depths as the first elevator had come up out of the hangar. Casually, Cross took one of the metal "crystal" cubes out of his pocket and tossed it into the wastepaper receptacle that fitted snugly into one corner of the cage. He saw that the slans noticed his

action. He explained:

"Got a dozen of those things, but eleven is all I can comfortably carry. The others kept pressing that one against my side."

It was Ingraham who stooped and picked up the dangerous little thing. "What is it?" he asked.

"The reason for my delay," Cross explained. "I'll explain to the commission later. The twelve are all exactly the same, so that one won't matter."

Ingraham stared at the crystal thoughtfully, and was just about to open it, when the elevator stopped. He put it in his pocket. "I'll keep this," he said. "You go out first, Corliss."

Without hesitation, Cross stepped into the broad marble corridor.

A fine-looking woman in a white cloak came forward: "You will be called in a few minutes, Ingraham. Wait here."

She vanished into a doorway. Cross walked slowly across the width of the stately corridor to a glass window, stared through it into the room beyond. Gradually, his muscles grew tense, his nerves taut. With uttermost fascination he gazed at an entire room, filled with monstrosities!

DEAD babies lay on the tables, row on row of them, stretching in even lines away from the glass through which Cross stared.

The nearest of that gruesome line was human in shape, but it had three legs. Small, golden slan tendrils lay flat on its head. Two semi-human arms emerged from its shoulders, tapering off into boneless tentacles. Its eyes were lidless, and the glazed eyeballs, that stared sightlessly up at him, had no color, unlike a normal human baby, whose eyes at birth are invariably blue.

Cross' blood seemed to freeze as he gazed at the thing. It was not human, and not slan. But Cross knew the answer. Horribly, the child had been intended to be a slan. Somewhere in the months before it was born or conceived, a true slan had turned a slan-controlling machine on its mother.

In all the years since he had first heard of these creatures, here was his first sight on them. Here existed the reality behind all the devilish accusations that he had, in his childhood, denied so passionately, and branded as the vilest of lies.

Horror coursed through him. These creatures were some of the dreadful failures of slan attempts to make more slans. No wonder there were attempts at slan extermination. What manner of distorted mentality could go on committing such atrocities, prepared to accept such a criminally high percentage of failure?

He thought: Was he a fool to keep searching for beings capable of such villiany, to think of aligning himself with them? Everywhere he turned the material evidence against them piled higher and higher. Before such silent witnesses as these babies, his theory seemed shabbier every minute. Here was nothing but evil and danger.

Danger! He grew aware of a surface thought from Ingraham. He turned as the older slan said:

"This business of Mrs. Corliss worries me so much that I feel—before we allow you in there, Corliss—we ought to make a simple test that we haven't used for years?"

"What's the test?" Cross asked.

"Well, if you're Cross, you'll be wearing false hair to cover your slan tendrils. If you're Corliss, the natural strength of your hair would enable us to lift you right off the ground, and you'd scarcely feel it. False hair, artificially fastened on, could not possibly resist the pull. So, for the sake of your wife, I'm going to ask you to bend your head. We'll be gentle, and apply the pressure gradually."

Cross smiled gently: "Go ahead! I think you'll find that it's genuine hair."

It was, of course. Long since, Cross had discovered a kind of answer to that dangerous problem—a thick fluid that, worked over the roots of his hair, grad-

ually hardened into a thin layer of rubbery, flesh-looking stuff, sufficient to cover his betraying tendrils. By carefully twisting the hair just before the hardening process was completed, tiny air holes were formed through to the hair roots.

Frequent removal of the material, and long periods of leaving his hair and head in the natural state had in the past, proved sufficient to keep the health of the top of his head unimpaired. Something similar, it seemed to him, was what the true slans must have been doing these many years. The danger lay in the periods of "rest."

Ingraham said finally, grudgingly: "It doesn't really prove anything. If Cross ever came here, he wouldn't be caught on anything as simple as that. Here's the doctor, and I guess it's okay."

THE BEDROOM was large and gray and full of machines, softly pulsing machines. The patient was not visible, but there was a long metal case, like a streamlined coffin, one end of which pointed toward the door. The other end Cross couldn't see, but he knew the woman's head was projecting from that far side.

Attached to the top of the case was a long, bulging transparent test tube affair. Pipes ran from it down into the "coffin," and through these pipes, through that bulbous bottle, flowed a rich, steady stream of red blood.

A solid bank of instruments sat almost stolidly just beyond the woman's protruding head. Lights were there, glowing with the faintest unsteadiness, as if now one, now another was yielding obstinately to some hidden pressure. Each time, the one affected fought stubbornly to regain the infinitesimal loss of brightness.

From where the doctor made him stop, Cross could see the woman's head against the background of those whispering machines. No, not her head. Only the bandages that completely swathed her head were visible. It was into the white pulp of bandage that the host of wires from the instrument board disappeared.

Her mind was unshielded, a still-broken thing; and it was into the region of semi-thoughts that flowed along in dead-slow time that Cross probed cautiously.

He knew that theory of what the tendrilless slan surgeons had done. The body was entirely disconnected from nervous contact with the brain by a simple system of short circuit. The brain itself, kept alive by rapid tissue building rays, had been divided into twenty-seven distinct sections. Thus simplified, the enormous amount of repair work had been swiftly performed.

His thought wave sped past those operation "breaks and mends." There were faults in plenty, he saw, but all of a distinctly minor character, so superbly had the surgical work been done. Every section of that powerful brain would yield to the healing force of the "medical light," which was what the tissue-building rays were called.

Beyond doubt, Mrs. Corliss would open her eyes a sane, enormously capable young woman—and recognize him for the imposter he was.

Icily detached in spite of urgency, Cross thought: "I was able to hypnotize human beings without crystals years ago, though it took a great deal longer. Why not slans?"

She was unconscious, and her shield was down. At first, he was too aware of the Porgrave receivers, and the immense danger they offered. Then he grooved his mind to the anxiety vibration that would be normal for Corliss —and to the devil with the consequences! All fear drained from his brain. He strained forward with frantic speed.

It was the method of the operations that saved him. A properly knit slan brain would have required—hours! So many millions of paths to explore, without a clue to a proper beginning. But now, in this divided brain, it was differ-

ent. A mind split by master surgeons into its twenty-seven natural compartments; and one of them was the mass of cells comprising the will power.

In one minute he was at the control center; and the palpable force of his thought waves had made her his slave.

He had time then to place the earphones of the Porgrave receivers over his head, noting at the same time that Bradshaw already had on a pair—for him, he thought grimly. But there was no suspicion at the surface of the dark-haired young man's mind. Evidently, thought in the form of an almost pure physical force, completely pictureless, could not be translated by the Porgraves. His own tests were confirmed.

The woman stirred mentally and physically; and the vague, incoherent thought in her mind clattered as a sound in his earphones:

"Fight . . . occupation—"

The words fitted only because she had been a military commander, but there was not enough to make sense. Silence; then:

"June. . . . definitely June. . . . We'd be able to finish before winter then, and have no unnecessary deaths from cold and dislocation. . . . That's settled then. . . . June tenth."

He could have repaired the faults in her brain in ten minutes by hypnotic suggestion. But it took an hour and a quarter of cautious cooperation with the surgeons and their vibration-pressure machine. Every minute of the time he was thinking about her words.

So June 10th was the day of the attack on Earth. This was April 4th, Earth reckoning. Two months! A month for the journey to Earth and a month—for what?

XXII

LIGHTLY, serenely, Mrs. Corliss slipped into a dreamless sleep, and Cross had the answer, the tremendous answer. Impossible to waste another day searching for the true slans, especially now that they loomed larger than ever as supreme villains. Later perhaps that trail would be picked up again, but now—if he could get out of this damned mess—

He frowned mentally. Why was he making plans? Within minutes he would be under physical examination by members of the most ruthless, most thorough-going and efficient race in the Solar System. In spite of his successful attempt at delay, in spite of his preliminary success in getting a crystal into the hands of one of his escort, luck had been against him. Ingraham was not curious enough to take the crystal out of his pocket and open it.

He'd have to make another attempt, of course, but that was desperation. No slan would be anything but suspicious at such a second try, no matter how the approach was made. He—

His thought stopped. His sensitive mind stilled to a perfect state of reception, as an almost inaudible voice spoke from Ingraham's radio; and the words flowed across the surface of Ingraham's mind:

"Physical examination completed or not, you will bring Barton Corliss immediately before me. That supersedes any previous order."

"Okay, Joanna!" Ingraham replied quite audibly. He turned: "You're to be taken at once before Joanna Hillory, the military commissioner."

It was Prentice who echoed the hard thought in Cross' mind. The tall slan said:

"Joanna is the only one of us who has spent hours with Cross; and she was appointed commissioner with that experience and her subsequent studies in minds. She supervised the world-wide successful search for you, and she also predicted the failure of the attack that was made with the cyclotron. In addition, she's written four books outlining in minutest detail the hours she spent in your company. If you're Cross, she'll recognize you in one minute flat."

"I've read the books," said Cross.

It was true. And he had realized, after the first volume, that under no voluntary circumstances must he come under the calm scrutiny of that able and terrible young woman.

As Cross emerged from the case room, he had his first glimpse of the city of Cimmerium, the true, the underground city. From the doorway he could see along two corridors. One led back to the elevator down which he had come; the other to a broad expanse of tall, transparent door.

Beyond the door lay a city of dreams.

Out in the street, he cut the unearthly beauty of the city from his consciousness. Only the people mattered; and there were thousands in the buildings, in bustling cars and on foot; thousands of minds within reach of a mind that missed nothing. Cross searched now with a desperate intensity for one, just one, true slan.

There was none. Not a trace of betraying mind whisper; not a brain that did not know its owner was a tendrilless slan. Definitely, finally, the leaky brain shields give of their knowledge. His conviction that they must be here was shattered, as his life would now be.

Wherever the true slans were, their protection was slan-proof.

"Here we are!" Ingraham said quietly.

Inside the fine, long, low building, a few men and women moved in and out among row on row of great, thick, shiny, metallic plates. This, Cross knew, was the Bureau of Statistics; and these plates were the electric filing cabinets that yielded their information at the touch of a button, the spelling out of a name, a number, a key word.

No one knew—so Corliss' mind had informed him—how much information was in those cabinets. They had been brought from Earth, and dated back to the earliest slan days. A quadrillion of facts were there for the asking. Included, no doubt, was the entire story of the seven year search for one, John Thomas Cross — the search that Johanna Hillory had directed from the inner sanctum of this very building.

But that last didn't matter now. There was a great truth to be discovered, a cross reference that perhaps had never occurred to anyone else in all this world of tendrilless slans.

Ingraham was saying: "She'll have us in in a minute or so."

Cross asked: "Do you mind if I ask a few questions from the 'Stics?"

Ingraham shrugged: "Might as well while you're here."

NO ONE followed Cross, no one interfered with him. He stood very still for a moment, recollecting exactly what he had seen in Corliss' mind about the operation of this machine. Swiftly, then, he punched: "Samuel Lann" followed by "Natural Mutation." He touched the activating button, and read on the glowing plate:

EXCERPTS FROM SAMUEL LANN'S DIARY, JUNE 1, 1971 TO DECEMBER 15, 2056

Today, I had another look at the three babies, and of course there is no doubt that here is an extraordinary mutation. I have seen human beings with tails; I have examined cretins and idiots, and observed those curious, dreadful, organic developments that human beings are subject to. But this is the opposite of such horrors; this is perfection—

"June 2, 1971," began the machine, but Cross pressed urgently at the dissolver, manipulated the number key, and produced "June 7, 1973," followed by:

Some damn fool journalist wrote an article about the children today. The ignoramus stated that I had used a machine on my wife. Where the devil did you hear about them at all? I'll have to retreat to some remote, uninhabited part of the world. Anything could happen where there are human beings—superstitious, emotional asses. Thank Heaven, the present-day human being is on this last lap.

Hurriedly, Cross punched at random. It was "August 18, 1990" that produced:

Each of the girls had triplets. Wonderful! At this rate of reproduction the period when chance can destroy them will soon be reduced

to a minimum. The children are fully alive now to the importance of their lives, and that their descendants are the future rulers of the Earth. I must see to it that the children of one marry only the children of the other. We must get away from inbreeding as soon as possible—

From behind him, Bradshaw called: "Come along, Corliss. Miss Hillory will see you now—alone!"

The floor felt strangely hard beneath his feet, as he walked the hundred feet to the open door. Sardonic expectancy was almost a physical weight on his mind. Eight hundred years of hell and death, perhaps more if the nameless, timeless period that followed the war of disaster was as long as some estimated; and now, a part of the simple truth rediscovered by a man on his way to death!

There was not—never had been—a slan-making machine. All slans were purely natural mutations.

The inner sanctum of the chief of statistics was large and cozy, and it looked like a private den rather than a business office. There were books on shelves; against one wall was a smaller version of the electric filing cabinets outside. There was a soft-toned chesterfield and multi-pneumatic chairs and a rug. Finally there was a great, gleaming desk behind which sat a proud, smiling, youthful woman.

Cross had not expected Joanna Hillory to look older, and she didn't. Now there was only one difference, and that was in himself. Eleven years before, a boy slan had gazed at this glorious woman. Now his eyes held the cool appraisal of maturity.

He noted curiously that her gaze was eager-bright, and that seemed out of place. His mind concentrated. The coordinated power of his senses abruptly dissolved her facial expression into triumph and a deep, genuine joy.

ALERTLY, his brain pressed against her mind-shields, probing at the tiny gaps, absorbing every leak of thought, analyzing every overtone—and second by second his puzzlement grew. Her smile flashed into soft laughter; and then—just like that—her shield went down. Her mind lay before him, exposed to his free, untrammeled gaze. Simultaneously, a thought formed in her brain:

"Look deep, John Thomas Cross, and know first that all Porgrave receivers in this room and vicinity have been disconnected. Know, too, that I am your only living friend, and that I ordered you brought before me to forestall a physical examination which you could not possibly survive. I watched you through the Porgraves and, finally, I knew it was you. But hurry, search in my mind, verify my good will, and then —we must act swiftly to save your life!"

Still he probed the corridors of her brain. At last he said quietly:

"So you believed in the ideals of a fifteen-year-old true slan?"

"I did," she said. "You brought hope just before I reached the point where most slans became as hard and ruthless as life in a hate-filled world can make them. I deliberately gave a false description of you. It was considered natural that I become a student of the Cross affair; and natural, too, that I was appointed to most of the supervisory positions that had any connection with you. I suppose it was equally natural that—"

She stopped almost expectantly; and Cross said gravely: "I'm sorry about that!"

Her gray eyes met his brown ones steadily: "Whom else will you marry?" she asked. "A normal life must include marriage. Of course, I know nothing of your relationship to the slan girl, Kathleen Layton, but marriage to several women, frequently at the same time, is not unusual in slan history. Then, of course, there is my age."

"I recognize," Cross said simply "that fifteen or twenty years is not the slightest obstacle to marriage among long-lived slans. It happens, however, that I

have a mission."

"Whether as wife or not," said Joanna Hillory, "from this hour you have a companion on that mission—provided we can get you through this physical examination alive."

"Oh, that!" Cross waved one smooth, powerful hand. "All I needed was time and a method of getting certain crystals into the hands of Ingraham and others. You have provided both. We'll also need the paralyzer gun in the drawer of your desk—and then call them in one at a time."

With one sweeping movement of her hand, she drew the gun from the drawer. "I'll do the shooting!" she said. "Now what?"

CROSS laughed softly at Johanna Hillory's vehemence and felt a strange wonder at the turn of events. His eyes gleamed.

"And you shall not regret what you have done, though your faith may be tried to the utmost before we are finished," he said. "This attack on Earth must not take place. Tell me, is there any way I can get to Earth?"

"You can. The decision rests entirely with me."

"Then," said Cross grimly, "the time has come for swift action. I must get to Earth. I must go to the palace. I must see Kier Gray."

She asked softly, "When you reach Earth, how are you going to get near the palace, with its fortifications?".

"My mother spoke often of the secret passages under the palace," Cross answered. "Perhaps the 'Stics' machine will know the exact location of the various entrances."

"I know where they are," Joanna Hillory said gravely. "The best entrance for your purpose is situated in the statuary section, two miles inside the grounds, constantly under brilliant lights, and directly under the guns of the first line of heavy fortifications."

"What kind of a man is Kier Gray, according to your records?"

"Enormously capable for a human being," she said, and betrayed apprehension. "What about those palace garden fortifications?"

He shook his head, smiling humorlessly: "When the stakes are great, risks must match them. Naturally, I shall go alone. You—" he gazed at her darkly— "will have the great trust of locating the cave where my ship is, and getting the machine through to Earth before June 10th. Corliss, too, will have to be released. And now, please call Ingraham in."

XXIII

BACK on Earth the river seemed wider than when Cross had last seen it. He had swum across the cold, turgid quarter mile of swirling May waters that glinted with endless reflections from the incessant, changing wonder-fire of the palace.

There was late spring snow in the concealing brush where he had left the river. The snow tingled coldly against his bare feet when he stood at last ready for his grueling task.

He smiled grimly: One naked slan against the world! This ring on his finger, with its tiny atomic generator, and its pitiful two-foot effective range —was his only weapon.

Taking his clothes from the waterproof sack, he donned them, and then lay patiently as an old tiger stalking its prey. There was a clearing to be crossed; and it was too far for hypnotic control. The moment of the guards' carelessness came abruptly — and he covered the fifty yards in a fraction over three seconds.

One man never knew what struck him. The other jerked around spasmodically, his long, thin face strained and ghastly in the flicker of light that peered through the foliage.

But there was no stopping, no evading the blow that caught his jaw, and smashed him to the ground. In fifteen minutes of crystalless hypnotism, they

were under control.

He brought the two men back to consciousness and gave them his orders. Silently, they took their portable machine guns and fell in behind him. They knew every inch of the ground. They knew when the tank patrols rolled by in their ceaseless night rounds. There were no better soldiers in the human army than these palace guards. In two hours there were a dozen trained fighters slipping along like shadows—working in a silent, swift co-ordination that needed only an occasional soft-spoken command.

In three more hours, he had seventeen men, a colonel, a captain and three lieutenants—and ahead was the long cordon of exquisite statuary, sparkling fountains and blazing lights that marked at once his goal and the end of the first simple operation.

The first hint of the coming dawn misted the eastern sky as Cross lay with his little army in the shadows of shrubbery and stared across the quarter mile of brilliantly lighted area. He could see the dark line of woods on the other side, where the fortifications were hidden.

"Unfortunately," the colonel whispered, "there is no chance of tricking them. The jurisdiction of this unit ends right here. It is forbidden to cross to any one of the dozen fortified rings without a pass, and even a pass can be used only in the day time."

Cross frowned. There were precautions here beyond his greatest expectations, and he saw that their strictness was of recent enactment. The slan attack on Cross' valley—though no one, at the time, suspected they were spaceships—had produced a nervous alertness, that might defeat him now.

"Captain!"

"Yes?" The tall officer slid up beside him.

"Captain, you look the most like me. You will, therefore, exchange your uniform for my clothes and then you—all of you — will return to your regular stations."

He watched them slip off, vanish. Then he stood up with the stiff carriage of the captain, and stalked out into the light.

Ten feet, twenty, thirty! He could see the fountain he wanted, a great, glittering shape with its sparkling streams of water. Was the secret passage still there, after all these hundreds of years? If it were not there, God help him!

Forty feet, fifty, sixty—and then to his tense, desperate brain came a whisper, the tiniest of tiny mind-vibrations, so weak as to be but a veriest caress:

"To any slan who penetrates this far — there is a secret passage into the palace. The five-flower design on the white fountain due north is a combination knob that operates on the secret door by radio. The combination is . . ."

He had known—the 'Stics machine had known—that the secret was in the fountain, but no more than that. Now—

A harsh, magnified voice smashed out from the far trees:

"Who the devil are you? What do you want? Get back to your commanding officer! Obtain a pass and return in the morning. Quick!"

He was at the fountain, his swift fingers on the flower design, his body and action half-hidden from the host of staring, suspicious eyes. There was not an ounce of energy to spare from his intense concentration.

Before that singleness of purpose, the combination yielded; and a second thought came from a second Porgrave broadcaster:

"The door is now open. It is an extremely narrow tunnel leading down through dense darkness. The mouth is in the center of the equestrian group of statuary a hundred feet due north. Have courage—"

IT WAS NOT courage that was lacking; it was time! A hundred feet north, toward the palace, toward those menacing forts! Cross laughed mirthlessly. The ancient builder of the secret

entrance had certainly picked a hell of a spot to practise his ingenuity. Cross walked on, even as the harsh voice lashed out again:

"You out there! . . . You will stop at once, or we fire. Return to your district, and consider yourself under arrest. At once!"

"I've got a very important message!" Cross called in a clear voice, that was as similar to the captain's as he could make it. "Emergency!"

And still they didn't actually consider one man dangerous. Still he walked on. The answer blared back.

"No possible emergency justifies flagrant breach of regulations. Return immediately to your district. . . . I warn you for the last time!"

He stared down at the little black hole. Sharp dismay struck into him like a knife, black and terrible as the tunnel itself. To entrust himself to that rabbit's burrow! Possibly to be buried alive in some cunningly contrived human trap! There could be no certainty that they had not discovered this, as they had already discovered so many other slan hideaways.

But the need for action was urgent. A torrent of sibilant pulsations reached out of the trees ahead, little menacing whispers that breathed against his brain.

Somebody saying: "Sergeant, train your gun on him!"

"What about the horse group, sir? Be a bloody shame to nick them!"

"Aim at his legs and then his head!"

And that was that. With clenched teeth, body stiff and straight, and arms flung over his head, he leaped like a diver going feet first—and came down so perfectly in the tunnel that it was several seconds before his clothes scraped the vertical walls.

The passage was as smooth as glass. It was only after Cross had fallen an immense distance that it started to tilt away from the vertical. Pressure of friction grew stronger. After more swift seconds, he was sliding along at a distinct angle, that grew flatter by the instant. His breathless speed slowed measurably. He saw a glimmer of light ahead. Abruptly, he emerged into a low-roofed, dimly lighted corridor. His journey ended, he lay dizzily on his back for a moment.

A single, dim ceiling bulb shed a dull refulgence upon the corridor, revealing a door.

Cross climbed to his feet, and found himself staring at a sign that was just high enough up on the wall for the ceiling light to touch it.

He read:

You are now two miles below the surface. The tunnel behind you is blocked by steel and concrete shafts, which were actuated, each in its turn, by your passage. It will take several hours to get from here to the palace. Slans not on official business are forbidden from entering the palace. Take heed!

Cross bent in the half-darkness, and ran his fingers lightly over the floor. A soft, thick carpet of dust lay there. He peered ahead, searching for footprints that would show that this corridor had been recently used. He found none. Now he must, in defiance of the slan law, penetrate the palace—and get at Kier Gray!

A WORLD of shadows and silence lay before Cross—and insidious choking clouds of dust. There were doors and corridors, and great stately rooms, like long-abandoned funeral homes, like the temple of the dead-lost Chiir-folk that stood through all eternity in the shadows of Mount Cog in the upper Saemones Valley.

And then, abruptly, there was another sign, which read:

Warning! This passageway leads to the secret elevator into the study of Kier Gray. Under no circumstances must any slan enter this man's apartment. The slan government has invoked penalty Number 26 for such infringement: Section 26 of the Criminal Code states: "—the punishment shall be removal by surgery of the slan tendrils."

Take heed!

All around was dust. But no layer on layer of dust could conceal the menace of that warning. The very mention of Kier Gray proved that it had been placed there since the dictator's ascension to power as a young man—less than thirty-five years before.

Slan councils—removal by surgery of slan tendrils! Here, then, were the true slans. True slans who removed tendrils. Which made them similar to their tendrilless cousins. Which meant they could penetrate into cities like Cimmerium.

The first burning excitement passed. His mind grew cold; and he walked on thoughtfully. After all, he still must see Kier Gray. As for threats—let any slan, true or otherwise, threaten the master of atomic energy and hypnotism. Particularly the true slans, who had let matters get into an unholy mess.

A soft metallic click behind him whipped Cross out of his reverie. He whirled, and saw that a solid sheet of metal door had flowed softly into the floor over which he had just passed, creating a smooth, hard wall.

He stood still. For a moment he was a sensitive machine receiving impressions. There was the long, narrow corridor, ending just ahead; the dim lights above, and the floor beneath him, the latter cushioned by a thick, yielding dust.

Into the silence a second click projected harshly. The walls creaked metallically and began to move, coming at a deliberate pace toward him, and toward each other.

Automatic, he decided, for there was not the faintest tendril of thought anywhere. Coolly, he examined the potentialities of the trap, and presently discovered at the extreme end of each wall a nook. Each nook was six feet four inches in height, a shallow space large enough to hold half a human body sideways. Even the contours of the body were grooved into those nooks. There was the curve for the shoulders to fit into, and a narrow space for the arm and hand.

Cross frowned. In a few minutes, the walls would close together, and the only available space for him would be where the two nooks would then be joined. A neat trap!

True, the atomic energy of the ring on his finger would probably disintegrate a pathway for him through the walls or the door, but his strategy demanded that his trap be successful—up to a point.

He examined the nooks more carefully. His ring flashed twice in brief fury, dissolving the handcuffs that waited in the hand holes for the helpless, carving also enough space to give him freedom of movement. He stepped into the nook. Thirty seconds later the two walls met with a metallic bang.

A moment of silence! Then machinery whirred faintly, and there was a swift flow of upward movement. The movement continued for minutes on end. It slowed finally and stopped. But the machinery still whispered beneath him.

Another interval, and then the cubicle in which he stood began to revolve slowly. A crack appeared before his face, a crack that widened into a rectangular hole through which he could see into a room.

The machinery stopped whirring. There was silence again while Cross examined the room with swift, flashing gaze.

There was a desk in the center of the highly polished floor, and walnut paneled walls beyond. Some chairs and filing cabinets and the edge of a floor-to-ceiling bookcase completed what he could see of the spare, businesslike room.

Footsteps sounded. The man who came in and shut the door behind him was a magnificiently built creature, grayed at the temples now, with lines of age showing. But there was no one in all the world who would not have recognized that lean, dark, powerful face, those piercing eyes, the ruthlessness that was written indelibly on that lean

line of jaw. It was a face too determined to be pleasant. But, withal, it was a noble countenance. Here was a born leader of men.

Cross felt himself dissected, his face explored by those keen eyes. Finally, the proud mouth twisted into the faintest sneer.

Kier Gray said: "So you got caught in spite of the warnings."

It was the words that did it. For with them came surface thoughts, and those surface thoughts were a deliberate screen held over a mind shield as tight as his own. No leaky tendrilless slan shield this, but an enormous fact. Kier Gray, leader of men, was—

"A TRUE SLAN!" exclaimed Cross.

THAT one explosive sentence Cross uttered, and then the fluidity of his mind chilled into an ice quiet thought. During all those years that Kathleen Layton had lived with Kier Gray, she had not suspected the truth. Of course, she had lacked experience with mind shields, and there had been John Petty with the same type of shield to confuse the issue, because John Petty was human. How cleverly the dictator had imitated the human way of thought protection!

Cross was mentally determined to get reaction this time. He repeated:

"So you are a true slan!"

Kier Gray's dark face twisted sardonically. "What did you expect? For hundreds of years we who knew the truth have existed for one purpose: to prevent the tendrilless slans from taking over the world of men. What is more natural than that we should insinuate our way to control of the human government? Are we not the most intelligent beings on the face of the Earth?"

Cross nodded. It fitted, of course. His own deductions had told him that. It was inevitable they would be governing the human world. But what about the tendrilless slan X-ray pictures showing Kier Gray to be possessed of a human heart and other non-slan organs? Somewhere here was still tremendous mystery.

He shook his head finally: "I still don't get it. Why anti-slan propaganda? What about that slan ship which came to the palace eleven years ago? Why are true slans hunted and killed like rats. Why not an arrangement with the tendrilless slans?"

The leader stared at him coldly: "We have tried on occasion to tamper with anti-slan propaganda. The number of true slans who were killed in various parts of the world has always been unfortunate. They are the descendants of slans who were scattered after the War of Disaster, and never made connection with the slan organization. Tendrilless slans, our enemies, were in a position to interfere with every communication device that we possessed.

"We tried our best, naturally, to contact such wanderers. But the only ones who really got through were those who came to the palace to kill me. For them we provided a number of easy passageways into the palace. My instruments tell me that you came through one of the ancient entrances. Very daring. We can use another bold young man in our organization. Though why you came on—knowing true slans ruled here—after warnings—"

He finished curtly: "However, everything will be explained to you later. I shall now actuate the machinery that will transport your cubicle to the lower tunnels. There, in due course, a slan will arrive to remove your tendrils, after which you will be released. This is in accordance with the law forbidding slans to enter my rooms."

XXIV

RIGID with defiance, Cross stared at the dictator. Kier Gray obviously did not suspect his identity, nor did he know how near was the hour of tendrilless slan attack. It made the moment a

great one, as Cross said:

"Unfortunately, I have no intention of doing without my tendrils. In this case I refuse to accept the jurisdiction of the laws of the slans. That is final."

"They all object. That's why we do it forcibly—for their own protection." The older man finished dryly: "No doubt you will recognize our legal jurisdiction after the operation has been performed."

His smile faded abruptly as Cross lifted his hand and rubbed his chin. Kier Gray said in a tight voice: "There's only one man in the world who could nullify the hard steel of the handcuffs in that cubicle."

Amazingly, the strong face relaxed. The hard lines had faded. But the eyes showed a glad, eager, joy. He half-whispered:

"Man, man, you've done it! In spite of our being unable to give you the slightest help! Atomic energy—at last."

His voice rang out then, clear and triumphant: "John Thomas Cross, I welcome you and your father's great discovery. Come in here and sit down. Wait a minute while I get you out of that place! We can talk here in this very private den of mine. No one else is ever allowed here, except the cleaning woman."

The wonder of it grew with each passing minute. The tremendousness of what it meant, this world-wide balancing of immense forces: true slans with human beings, who knew not their masters, against the tendrilless slans who, in spite of their brilliant, far-flung organization, had never guessed the truth behind the mystery.

"Naturally," said Kier Gray, "your discovery that slans are naturals and not machine-made is nothing new to us. We are the mutation-after-man. The forces of that mutation were at work many years before that great day when Samuel Lann's wife gave birth to the three originals. It is only too obvious now, in retrospect, that Nature was preparing for a tremendous attempt. Cretins increased alarmingly, insanity advanced by enormous percentages.

"For a hundred, perhaps a thousand years, the tensions had been building up. And then in a single stupendous quarter of a millennium more than a billion abnormal births occurred. It was like a cataclysm that paralyzed human beings. The truth was lost in a wave of terror that swept the world into bloody war. All attempts to revive the truth have been swamped by an incredible mass hysteria—even now after a thousand years.

"Yes, I said a thousand years. Only we true slans know that the nameless period actually lasted five hundred hellish years, and that Samuel Lann's children were born nearly fifteen hundred years ago, before the real wave of births started.

"The wave had spent itself. Nature's part of the work ended. It remained for

[*Turn page*]

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intelligence to carry on. And that was where the difficulty came.

"During the nameless period, slans were hunted like wild beasts—there is no modern parallel for the ferocity of human beings against the creatures they considered responsible for the disaster. It was utterly impossible to organize. Our forefathers tried everything: underground hideouts, surgical removal of tendrils, replacement of human hearts for their own double hearts, the skinlike stuff over tendrils, which I see you have been using. But it was no good.

"The scattered remnants of the slans finally concentrated all their efforts on a study of the mutation force, convinced that the solution lay there. At last they found the answer: genes with genes. Sausagelike infra-links, chain of ultimate life stuff that controlled the true genes, as the genes, in their turn, controlled the organs—hearts, nerves, tendrils.

"It remained then to experiment. We found at last that each of the infra-genes controlled a generation. Strike one off the chain, and for one generation the organ affected vanished, only to turn up the following generation. And so we eliminated the double heart for twelve links—three hundred years. It came back on schedule.

"We removed thirty links from the chain controlling the tendrils, and they are due back in another forty to fifty years—"

CROSS interrupted with a gasp: "Wait a minute! When I first started to search for the true slans, logic said they were infiltrated into the tendrilless slan organization. Are you trying to tell me that the tendrilless slans are the true slans?"

Kier Gray nodded matter-of-factly: "Where else could they have come from?"

At last Cross said: "But why did you ever stop them from knowing the truth?"

"The truth was withheld because it was necessary to observe and study psychological reactions," Kier Gray exclaimed. "We had removed generations of genes to protect them from predatory human beings. I am similarly protected, though in my case it ends with me. As a result they had not the strength or energy to be anything but quiet-living folk in the remote corners of the world. Then the double heart came back, the superlative nervous system and the muscular strength that went with it—and, in spite of their new powers, they still preferred to lead their peaceful existence.

"Slans must not be permitted to stay pacifistic; for it is certain that human beings will vanish from the Earth as a result of the sterility that has already started on a vast scale.

"Undoubtedly, that sterility will be blamed on the slans; and when human beings discover it there will begin the second great wave of ferocity and terrorism. Nothing but the most powerful organization can save the slans."

"And so," Cross said softly, "you drove out the tendrilless—the protected—slan with violence that bewildered them, then brought an equally ruthless reaction. Ever since you've been a spur on their expansion and a check on that artifically engendered ruthless spirit of theirs. But why haven't you told them the truth?"

The leader smiled grimly: "From what you've told me, I can see that we must act swiftly. Your hypnotism crystals, of course, are the final solution to the human being problem. Not one of us but can have pity for their position. Thank Heaven, in less than a hundred years, long before the situation becomes acute, there'll be enough tendrilled slans to hypnotize every human being. So their passing will be painless and happy.

"As for the imminent attack, we have space ships. We shall fit them with your atomic drivers and projectors, and make a big noise with a small force. My colleagues have a few tricks of their

own that they've been saving for this moment; and the combination, plus a speech by you on the tendrilless slan radio, should provide us with that fifty-year delay.

"You can tell them that ever since their attack on your valley, human factories have been turning out weapons. And now, after you've had a look in my mind to verify everything I've told you, what is your father's secret?"

AFTER a few minutes, Cross smiled and said: "Simplicity. My father was always fascinated by the first simple application of atomic energy in the old days. You know the principle: Uranium 235 placed in a boiler heats the water and produces steam to run engines.

"He rejected the massive cyclotron principle in toto, and envolved finally a central core from which positive electrons whirled outward.

"Each electron became matter in a minus state, with a destructive power utterly out of proportion to its 'size.' Normal matter simply goes mad in the presence of this minus stuff and reverts instantly to a primeval state. It—"

Cross stopped. Pallor spread over his face. He jumped to his feet, his muscles stiffening, nerves taut, body cold. The door opened lightly, and a tall, young woman came in.

She had flashing eyes, this young woman, and a strong, mature, finely molded, delicately textured face, and because his mind was always held on a tight band of thought, she came in without knowing he was there. He recognized her at once.

Cross thought piercingly: He should have guessed after the way Mrs. Corliss' smashed head had been repaired by the tendrilless slan doctors. He should have known, the moment he discovered Kier Gray was a true slan, should have guessed, knowing the terrible hates and envies that saturated the palace here, that only death—and a return from death in secret—could ultimately and effectively keep Kathleen forever safe from John Petty!

It was at that moment that Kier Gray's voice cut across the silence with the rich tone of one who had secretly relished this instant for years:

"Jommy Cross, I want you to meet Kathleen Layton—my daughter!"

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The House on the Vacant Lot

By MARI WOLF

"NO," RONALD BRISBANE said firmly. "I don't like any of these houses. They're all too much alike. No imagination."

The real estate agent sighed. It was a hot July afternoon, and both his feet and his temper were beginning to blister. "After all, Mr. Brisbane," he said, "just what can you expect for fifteen thousand dollars? This subdivision is one of the finest . . ."

Ronald Brisbane shook his head. "Birdhouses," he said. "Row after row of birdhouses. Little square boxes with pointed roofs." He peered owlishly up at the agent. "Do you really expect people to *live* in them?"

For just an instant the agent's habitually bland expression was replaced by one of frustrated mayhem. Ronald Brisbane hastily stepped back off the sidewalk onto the newly seeded lawn of House 22.

"I didn't . . . " he began, then suddenly he smiled delightedly. "Oh," he cried. "There's the very one! Funny I didn't see it before." He pointed over the realtor's shoulder.

The agent turned, puzzled. There was nothing but a vacant lot across the street in back of him. The subdivision hadn't yet built up that far. Then he gasped and stopped listening to the delighted sounds that Mr. Brisbane was making.

For there *was* a house on the opposite corner. A rambling Moorish style house set in the middle of a rose garden. A very solid and substantial looking house that just couldn't possibly be where it was.

"I'll take that one," Mr. Brisbane said, almost running as he hurried across the street.

"But it isn't . . ." the agent exclaimed after him.

Mr. Brisbane paid no attention. He stepped up onto the opposite curb and started up the flagstone path between the rose bushes.

"Hey, come back here!" the agent called.

Ronald Brisbane strode purposefully up to the front door. For a moment he stood fumbling with the knob, and the agent took a half-hearted step after him. Then Brisbane straightened triumphantly, walked through the door, and closed it behind him.

"It's not possible," the agent whispered.

The house stood silent. The rose bushes swayed a little in the faint breeze. Their scent was heavy and cloying.

The agent rubbed his hand over his eyes and forehead, wiping away the sweat. Movers could have set the house up while he was showing Brisbane the other side of the subdivision, but the garden . . . He looked back toward the roses, and heard himself whimper.

Across the street was nothing but a vacant lot.

Junior floated casually back up to the ceiling

It was an attractive, rambling, Moorish style house . . . with one disturbing habit. It did its rambling in Time!

JUST inside the door Ronald Brisbane paused and looked around.

"An interesting arrangement," he murmured. "Furnished, too."

He scuffed his toe against the nap of the wheat-colored carpet. It was soft and springy underfoot, made from sort of spun fiber he couldn't identify.

"Quite different," he said happily. "Really designed to be lived in. Of course, it probably costs a lot more than fifteen thousand . . ."

He glanced back to see if the real estate agent had come in yet, but saw no one. "That's odd," he muttered. "I wonder what's keeping him?"

For a minute he paused uncertainly, then he turned back to the front door and twisted the knob.

Nothing happened. The knob turned only so far, then caught. He rattled it several times and jerked hard on the door, but it still wouldn't open.

"Locked," he said impatiently.

He took one step toward the window. Then he froze.

The incredibly bony young woman in the short yellow tunic stared back at him. Her body had tensed as she saw him, then relaxed.

"How did you get in here?" she asked.

"I—I'm terribly sorry, Miss . . ."

He swallowed and dropped his eyes He found himself staring at her hemline, which came considerably above her knees, and looked up again hastily. She stood watching him speculatively.

"I—I didn't know anybody lived here," he explained lamely. "I thought this house was for sale."

"Well, it's not." She looked him up and down, then shook her head with a puzzled frown. "Do you usually dress up for a costume ball when you go shopping for a house?" she asked abruptly.

"What?" Ronald Brisbane glanced down at his double breasted pin-stripe suit and solid blue tie. They weren't even mussed. He looked back at the girl and decided that she must have been joking, for she would easily have won a prize for outlandish appearance at any costume party.

It wasn't so much the yellow tunic and thonged sandals—these were simple enough. But her face was a topheavy mask of thick purple eyeshadow and absolutely no lipstick. Her black hair might have been really beautiful if it hadn't been cut in straight bangs across an already too low forehead and then piled up in long, carefully coiled ringlets pinned to the top of her head. She rubbed her cheek with one hand, thoughtfully, and he noticed that her fingernails were long and silvered.

Slowly Ronald Brisbane backed toward the door through which he had entered. "I'll be going now," he said. "Sorry I bothered you. Could you—could you let me out? I seem to have locked myself in here . . ."

The girl glanced idly toward a panel recessed in the wall behind her. A red light was blinking on and off.

"Of course the door's locked," she said. "The house is moving."

Ronald Brisbane eyed her warily. She seemed calm enough, at the moment, but he really couldn't be sure . . . Then resolutely he crossed over to the front window and drew back the curtain.

"No," he gasped. "Oh, no!"

He dug his fingers into the yielding plastic window sill and closed his eyes. Then he forced himself to open them and look out again, hoping he had been wrong, hoping that somehow he had lost track of the intervening hours and it was night outside. But it wasn't. The rose bushes were twined shadows in the haze of the garden. But beyond the garden it was black, much too black.

"What's the matter?" He heard her voice dimly, from a long way off. "Are you ill?"

He leaned his head against the window glass. It felt cool and firm, real enough in this crazy room. "What's happening?" he asked hoarsely.

"Nothing's happening," she said. "We're just moving, that's all. Junior's driving Father to work. We'll be there soon."

Just then the whole house shook gently. "We're stopping now," she said. "We're . . ."

The house lurched violently. Ronald Brisbane felt the window sill jerk from his hands just as the floor started to tilt . . .

HE'LL BE all right," a strange voice was saying. "He just got a bad bump."

Ronald Brisbane groaned.

"I think he's waking up now." It was the girl's voice.

Slowly he opened his eyes.

He saw their legs first. Two pairs of toothpicks, with dead white skin and knobby knees. He winced and raised his head.

The girl in the yellow tunic smiled down at him delightedly.

"Look, Mother," she said. "He's awake now."

Ronald Brisbane pulled himself to a sitting position. "What happened . . ." he began.

"Hush," said the older woman. "Don't talk now. Just rest." She smiled brightly down at him. "Get the young man a glass of water, Lilian."

"Yes, Mother," Lilian said.

He rubbed his aching head and looked again at the two women. He hadn't been mistaken. The family resemblance was very strong. Both were tall and angular. Both had long bare arms and bony wrists. Both had flat chests, thin necks, square faces, and bangs. The only difference in their dress was that the mother wore less eye shadow and her back hair was gathered up into a bun instead of a pile of ringlets.

"Look," Ronald Brisbane said. "I'm either crazy or dreaming, I know. But please tell me, where am I? What's happened?"

The older woman smiled a bit uncomfortably. "We've just had a—a little accident with the house," she said. "Junior was driving, and he must not have been paying attention. . . ."

"Here," Lilian said, thrusting a glass of water in front of him. "Drink this. You'll feel better."

"All I want," he said desperately, "is to get out of here."

Lilian's mother bit her lip. "You could leave now, of course, if you're in a hurry. But I wouldn't advise it. You see, we don't know exactly where we are. Junior got off the travel lanes a bit. It might be hard for you to find a housecar back to your home."

Ronald closed his eyes again. He was beginning to feel a horrible doubt in the pit of his stomach.

"Does your head ache very badly?" Lilian asked, laying her hand gently on his forehead.

He opened his eyes again hastily. "No, it's not that," he said. "It's just that I don't know what's going on. Look, I don't even know what you're talking about. Travel lanes, housecars—you mean you actually drive around *inside* this house?"

"Why certainly," Lilian said. "Don't you?"

"No."

"I thought everyone did," her mother said. "This is very odd. I wonder where Junior was, anyway, when he stopped the house long enough for you to come in?"

"I can tell you that," Ronald Brisbane said grimly. "He was in the United States of America. . . ."

Lilian clapped her hands. "Oh, I remember that!" she exclaimed delightedly. "It's in all the ancient history books. So you're from Earth too. I'm glad. . . ."

She stopped and looked at him doubtfully. "Are you sure?" she said. "You don't look much like us. I thought. . . ."

"Lilian," her mother said reproachfully.

Lilian flushed. "I'm sorry, Mother," she said. "You get used to a person and forget. . . ."

The older woman sighed. "I know," she said. Then she leaned over the couch and asked, "Are you really from the United States? From that long ago?"

"Yes," he said. "I was out looking for a house. It was in July, 1952." He glanced down at his watch. "It was also," he added, "just about half an hour ago."

THEY both stared at him and he found himself enjoying their mingled amazement and disbelief. He was quite sure that anything anyone said now would be anticlimactic.

He was wrong. The kilt-clad man who just then stepped into the room shattered everything.

"There's only one thing wrong with your story, young man," he said sternly. "You couldn't possibly have come from 1952. Time travel has been proved impossible!"

Ronald Brisbane let out his breath with a great sigh. He crossed to the window and looked past the roses, out across the landscape, and his sigh changed.

The house stood in the middle of a desert.

"It is desolate, isn't it?" a girl's voice said.

He turned, expecting to see still another of the scrawny women of this household. But once again he was surprised. For the girl who stood framed in the archway watching him was one of the most beautiful he had ever seen.

She was slender but softly rounded in all the right places, and there was certainly nothing bony about her legs . . . Ronald looked back at her face, wondering if he would ever get used to such short tunics.

"I don't think we'll be here much longer," she said. Her voice was low and soft.

Ronald couldn't help staring at her. In any group she would have been lovely but here, contrasted to the others, she was almost unbelievably so. He didn't even notice when the others left the room. He was just aware, suddenly, that they were gone.

"Are you one of the family too?" he asked.

"Yes." She spoke reluctantly, looking down at her feet. "I'm Nora."

"Nora," he said softly. For the first time since he entered this room he stopped regretting having seen the house. "Nora what?"

"Nora Taine," she said. "Didn't anyone introduce you?"

He laughed. "I guess there was too much excitement for formal introductions. I'm Ronald Brisbane. And I really am from 1952."

"I believe you, Ronald." She came over beside him and put her hand on his arm. "Don't mind Father," she said. "He was just awfully upset over the accident."

Her blue tunic matched her eyes perfectly. It clung to her body as she moved, revealing a figure that was young and supple and softly curved. He smiled down at her, wondering how she had ever happened to be born into this family.

"Ronald," she said, "if you're really from that long ago, all this must be very strange to you."

"It is, Nora." He sighed. "I wish you'd explain some things to me. Nobody else will. In fact, you're the only one I've been really able to talk to."

She flashed him a shy smile. "Thank you," she said.

SHE sat down on the couch and he sat down as close beside her as he dared. She glanced over at him, hesitantly. There was something in her manner that he couldn't quite figure out. It was almost as though she were afraid of him, and yet she seemed to like him.

"In the first place," he asked, "where are you people from?"

"From? That's rather hard to say. I was born in Africa, while Father was teaching there. So I really am a Terran. Lilian isn't, though she always says she is. She was born on Mars during Father' sabbatical. Mother and Father are Terrans, of course. Only rich people had interplanetary houses

then. Junior. . . ."

"No," Ronald said patiently. "That's not what I mean. Where do you live now? When the house isn't moving around, that is."

"Oh." Nora smiled. "Up until last semester we lived out at the University on Easter Island. But then Mother wanted more land for an outer garden, so we moved to a new parking lot on one of the artificial islands near the South Pole. It's very well heated."

Ronald repressed a groan. "What year are you from?" he said.

"4823. Your time.

He carefully refrained from asking her what other kinds of time there were, fearing she would tell him. Instead he said, "I wonder why the English language hasn't changed in all those years?"

"Oh, but it has," Nora said casually. "You wouldn't understand us at all if we talked Terran, and yet that's a direct descendent of English."

"But you're speaking English now. Twentieth-century English. Everyone in your family has been speaking it. And your accents are perfect. . . ."

"Of course," she said. "We're speaking it because you are, to be polite. And naturally we use it correctly. Father has an excellent set of Phonetic Installers. We know all the ancient languages. All educated people do."

"You know all of them?"

"Well, all there are recordings of. Most of the Middle Period Terran languages, and High and Low Martian and. . . ."

"Nora," he said firmly, "about this house of yours. How long have you people had traveling homes?"

"Oh, ever since about—I don't know exactly. I'm not very good at dates. But it's been almost a thousand years."

"And how do these houses work?"

"They're fully automatic. Would you like to see our cooking unit?"

"I would rather see the—er—steering wheel and motor," he said.

She looked at him apologetically. "I don't drive," she said. "If you want to know anything about the subspace part, you'll have to ask Father. Or Junior. But I guess you won't see Junior tonight. He's been sent to his room."

"Let's talk about something else then," he said.

"Good," Nora said. "What?"

Her blue eyes were sparkling now as they met his and she seemed much less shy. He reached out and took her hand. She didn't draw it away.

"Nora," he said finally, "you're so—so different from the others. . . . "

"Oh!"

She jerked her hand away from his and leaped to her feet, her eyes blazing. "How could you?" she cried. "I thought that *you* would understand what it's like. . . ."

She turned and ran from the room.

Ronald Brisbane walked slowly over to the window and looked out at the encircling desert. Then he walked back to the couch and sat down. He was quite sure now that he was mad.

OH, THERE you are, young man," Mr. Taine said. This time he had wiped the dirt off his forehead, put a piece of tape over the cut on his cheek and apparantly calmed down a little as well.

"Sorry I snapped at you," he said, dropping onto the couch beside Ronald. "But this has been an awfully trying day for me."

"For you?"

Mr. Taine didn't seem to notice the sarcasm. "Yes," he said. "It's my fault, in a way. I should never have let Junior drive this morning, not when I had a faculty meeting coming up first period."

He shook his head. "Children have no sense of responsibility these days. Now when I was Junior's age. . . ."

"Please," Ronald said desperately. "All this may seem very natural to you. Wandering around getting your house lost and all that. But it's not what I'm used to. All I want to do is get home again. . . ."

Mr. Taine shrugged. "Well, I'll have the house coils reset in another fifteen minutes," he said. "And I've already patched up the materializer. It wasn't much of an accident, really. Just inconvenient. But I don't see how I can take you into the past, Mr. Brisbane."

Ronald looked at him for a long minute. Then he smiled.

"Perhaps you won't have to," he said.

He got up and walked to the window and gazed out at the desert. It was flat and utterly bleak. It didn't look like any part of the Earth he knew, nor even like any of the deserts he had read about. The house might have been on some other planet, except that the sun overhead was definitely Earth's sun.

He turned and looked back at Mr. Taine. "How do you know," he said gently, "that 1952 *is* in the past?"

"Of course it is. History. . . ."

"Look out the window, Mr. Taine. Is your world like that?"

It took a full minute for the implication to sink in. Ronald couldn't help smiling still more at the dismay that seeped slowly into the other's face. Not that it was funny at all, really. . . .

"I thought we were in the Sahara, naturally," Mr. Taine said. "But come to think of it, there should be hydroponics oases . . ."

He shook his head and turned away from the window. "No," he said stubbornly. "There's no such thing as time travel. As soon as the house is ready to go, I'll set it for Easter Island and take you with us to the University. They may be able to help you there."

WELL," Mr. Taine said half an hour later. "We're almost there."

He and Ronald were sanding in the control room, looking out through the glass walls at the black nothingness of sub-space that enfolded the garden. Behind them, in the master bedroom, Lilian and her mother crowded against the control room door, waiting.

Ronald couldn't see Nora, although he knew she was there. She had taken a seat on the far side of the bedroom, out of sight from the controls. And she wouldn't even speak to him.

"All we have to do now is warp back up," Mr. Taine was saying. "You see, private houses have to travel slowly, in their own assigned lanes, and it's the crossing into and out of sub-space that takes time. Traffic jams."

The red light over the dial was marked with the symbol that Mr. Taine had translated as Sub-Space Warpage; it was blinking slower and slower, and the calibrating dial read almost zero. Mr. Taine moved the rudder into neutral.

"That should do it," he remarked cheerfully.

The house slowed to a stop, gently this time. The blackness gradually seeped away, replaced by a blue sky and a bluer ocean, and, about thirty feet directly underneath them, a barren, rocky island. They paused, Mr. Taine making no effort to land the house, and looked down through the transparent floor viewer.

"Well," Mr. Taine sighed. "You were right."

"Father," Lilian called. "What's the matter? Where are the buildings?"

Mr. Taine and Ronald looked at each other helplessly. Then the older man sighed again. "We'll have to tell them," he said.

They went out into the bedroom. Lilian and her mother leaned forward eagerly.

"Why is it taking us so long?" Lilian asked.

Mr. Taine looked down at the floor and didn't say anything. Ronald answered for him.

"Your books are wrong," he said gently. "There really is time travel. And we're in the past somewhere—the far past."

"Oh, how exciting!"

Then Lilian's squeal changed midway into a squawk of terror. "But how are we going to get home?"

"Yes," her mother said. "Exploring the past may be all right for you men, but I have a club meeting this afternoon and . . . ."

Ronald Brisbane put his hands in his pockets and strode quickly out of the room. He crossed over to what was apparently a glassed-in observation veranda and sat down on the swing chair and tried to think. . . .

A few minutes later he jumped up again.

"Junior!" he exclaimed. "Of course!"

It was all very simple, suddenly. All he had to do was find Junior and ask him what he had done to the drive mechanism of the house. Because it was obvious that Junior had done something to it.

"Nora!" he called. "Will you come here a minute?"

There was quick silence, then the sound of footsteps, muffled against the soft carpeting.

"What is it, Ronald?" she asked.

She stepped out into the hall and paused, waiting. Then as he started toward her she came forward to meet him.

For a minute, watching her, Ronald forgot all about Junior and the problem of the house. He could only stare at her admiringly.

She smiled at him. "You called me," she said.

"Yes, I did." He forced his thoughts away from her. "Where is Junior, Nora? I want to talk to him."

Nora frowned. "I don't know if Father would like that. He's in his room, being punished for. . . ."

"For wrecking the house. I know that. But I still want to see him, and it's important. Maybe he can unwreck it again. Which room is his, Nora?"

"Right down the hall." She glanced back toward her parents' room, but no one was looking out. "Here, I'll show you," she said.

HE FOLLOWED her down the hall to a small curtained archway. As they stepped through it, Ronald found himself wondering what Junior would be like. Probably a normal, prank-playing youngster, though if he looked like his father. . . .

"Ouch!" Ronald yelled as something hot and tingling slashed across his ankles. He stumbled forward across the room.

Blue fire ate up his legs to his knees, then burned out abruptly. With its cessation there came a sudden thump, a gasp, and the figure of a boy falling apparently from the ceiling and landing about six inches from Ronald's feet. The boy rolled over, sat up, and glared.

"What. . . ." Ronald began, rubbing an ankle that felt as if it had just come out of an oven.

Junior interrupted him. "Did you really *have* to step in my Throndike field?" he said. "You could hurt a guy that way."

Ronald limped over to Junior's bed and sat down. "I realize that," he said.

He eyed Junior warily, quite certain now that he had found the person responsible for marooning them somewhere. Junior would undoubtedly be capable of anything. Ronald flexed his toes, wincing a little as the stiffness left them.

"All right, Junior," he said. "You might as well tell me. What did you do to the sub-space drive that made the house come here?"

The boy stood up and rearranged his orange plaid kilts. Then he smiled at Ronald, the blankly innocent look of a medeival cherub superimposed upon his thin, ugly face.

"Do?" he said. "Why I didn't even *touch* the drive. Is something wrong?"

His smile grew even broader as Ronald and Nora looked helplessly at each other. . . .

"Please, Junior," Nora said for the twentieth time. "Tell us what you did to the controls. You must have done something. . . ."

Junior shook his head again. "But I didn't, Nora," he protested. "You know

that Dad made me promise never to fool around with the drive mechanism."

He picked up another coil of wire and added it to the complicated pyramidal structure he was assembling on the rug. Then he bent forward, studying it. The knowledge that they were somewhere thousands of years from where they had been a few hours previously didn't seem to interest him in the least.

"But Junior. . . ." Nora said.

"I don't break my promises." Junior sniffed. "If I did, do you think Dad would ever let me drive again? Or even take the annex out on Sundays? You know how he is about things like that."

Nora turned helplessly to Ronald. "If he does know anything," she said, "he's not going to tell us."

Ronald thought back over all the child psychology he had ever read about. He wished now that he had paid a little more attention to the subject.

Junior connected another strand of wire and sat back on his heels and grinned at his work. "Nice job, isn't it?" he said. "Now I'll just start her up. . . ."

He floated casually back up to the ceiling. "Be careful you don't step in the field again when you go out," he called down.

Ronald glared up at where the boy lay stretched out comfortably in the empty air, well out of reach. Then he forced a pleasant smile onto his face.

"Junior," he said. "Why don't you tell *me* what you did to the house? I won't let your father know, I promise. Then I can go and change it back and . . ."

"Huh." Junior drew his knees up under his chin and hugged them. "Why should I tell *you* anything? I don't even like you."

"Junior!" Nora snapped. "He's our guest."

"Some guest. Trying to order us all around."

Junior stretched out full length once more and closed his eyes.

Ronald opened his mouth to speak, realized that what he was going to say wasn't the sort of language he would want Nora to hear, and closed it again. Finally he turned to the girl.

"Go get your father," he said.

"But he'll be angry."

"Not at you." Then, as she still hesitated, he added, "Oh, all right. I'll go with you."

She started toward the archway, stepping carefully and apparently automatically over the Throndike field, and Ronald followed her.

"It won't do you any good," Junior said from above their heads.

Ronald didn't answer.

"And you're too dumb to figure it out yourself," Junior added.

Ronald paused, his hand already on the archway curtain. He looked up at Junior, who had now rolled over on his stomach and lay grinning down at him. The grin was too much.

Very deliberately Ronald drew back his left foot and kicked into the Throndike field. The fire that shot up his leg was agonizing, but he smiled despite it. It was well worth a second's pain to see the grin vanish from Junior's face as he catapulted to the floor.

"We'll be right back, Junior," he said. Then he limped out into the hall after Nora. . . .

MR. TAINE glanced questioningly at his son, then back at Ronald. "What's this about Junior now?" he asked.

"Nothing," Ronald said. "Except that he must have done something to the drive that made it bring us here. That's all."

Mr. Taine blinked. Then he shook his head. "Oh, no, I'm sure he wouldn't do anything like that." He paused, then added, "You didn't, did you, Junior?"

"Of course not, Father."

Mr. Taine spread his hands and smiled. "You see," he said. "He didn't do it."

Ronald groaned. "I suppose this house just came here all by itself," he said.

"Across all these thousands of years. . ."

Mr. Taine smiled apologetically. "I know you're anxious to get home, young man," he said. "So am I. But I'm sure there's a more logical explanation to all this. Time travel. . . ."

"Has been proved impossible." Ronald finished the sentence for him. "I know. It's too bad, though," he added. "Just think what it would mean if someone figured out how to make time travel really work."

"It can't be done," Mr. Taine said. "There's only one way that a sub-space field can flow. Parallel to normal time. That's in all the books. Though you wouldn't have read them, naturally."

"So there's no way of changing the flow," Ronald said. "What a pity. It would make such an interesting experiment. . . ."

"Of course, of course," Mr. Taine said. "But it just can't be done."

Ronald looked straight at Junior as he said softly, "No, I suppose you're right." His face was turned so that only the boy could see him wink.

Junior shot him a startled glance, then suddenly grinned back. His look of suspicion faded, replaced by a certain grudging admiration.

"You know, Dad," he said, "I've been thinking."

Junior stood up, stretched, and then crossed the room to where the Throndike field apparatus lay dismantled on the floor. He bent down, picked up the pieces, put them away in a box, locked it and pocketed the key. Then he straightened up again and started for the archway.

"It's a pretty good idea, too," he said. "I bet that flow *could* be changed. If you set up a cross-current in the sub-sub elements. . . ."

Mr. Taine, after his first startled headshake, smiled down at his son. "Do you really think so, Junior?"

The bow shrugged. "How should I know? I never tried it."

Ronald snorted under his breath.

"But I could take a look," Junior said. "If you let me go back in the control room and drive, that is."

Mr. Taine hesitated a moment, frowning. Then he nodded.

"I guess you've been punished enough," he said. "After all, you were just being careless when you crashed us. And if you think you can get us home. . . ."

THERE," Junior said, hooking the second wire securely in place. "Now I'll start her up and see where we go."

The blackness came quickly. The dial blinked red, faster and faster, then steadied off for perhaps half a minute. Junior flicked a switch, and the blinking slowed.

There was a slight bump as the house landed. "Look out and see where we are," Junior said. "I may not have had the space and time coordinated right. Sub-sub's awfully tricky. . . ."

The blackness had thinned into a murky, greenish twilight. They sat waiting for it to thin more, but it didn't. Outside everything was a strange, light-filled translucence.

"Good heavens," Nora muttered. "When is this?"

Just then Lilian screamed. "Look out there!"

They turned to where she was pointing, just as she fainted. For once Ronald didn't blame her. The gigantic shark-like fish looking in at them was enough to make anyone faint.

"Get us out of here," Ronald ordered.

Junior didn't need any urging. He flicked them back into sub-space and the blackness flowed around them again.

"Go the other way, Junior," Ronald suggested. "We're probably still traveling back into the past."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because we're moving through time, not space. And we were just at a time when the ocean was higher and there wasn't any Easter Island."

The boy flicked one of the dials. "All right," he said. "We'll try it."

"We've got a long way to go yet,"

Ronald said. "This drive must be really powerful."

"Sure," Junior admitted. "I souped it up some."

A few moments passed.

"I can calibrate us in from here," Junior said suddenly. "I'm picking up the University signal in sub-sub."

Once again the dials zeroed and the blackness thinned.

"Where are we?" Mrs. Taine crowded toward the window.

"Home." Junior grinned. "Look over there!"

"The University!"

They pressed up against the window, making excited, happy sounds. A moment later Mr. Taine pressed a button that opened the control room window and leaned out. The man in the central tower waved casually at him.

"Oh, hello there," he said. "You're late this morning. Your class went over to Asia without you. Mr. Ricard substituted."

Mr. Taine smiled. "Thanks, Charlie," he said. He closed the window. "Well," he said, "we're home. Junior, you've done a great job. I'm really proud of you, son."

Junior grinned. His father clapped him heartily on the shoulder. "So time travel's really possible," he said.

Lilian had stopped crying. Now she was busily rubbing her eyelids with purple mascara. "I look a sight," she muttered.

"You sure do," Ronald said under his breath.

Nora giggled, and he realized that he must have spoken louder than he had intended. He smiled down at her.

She looked up at him, her eyes shining. She had forgotten all about being shy, or angry, or upset, and now she was just beautiful.

"You're wonderful, Nora," he said softly.

"Do you really think so, Ronald?"

Outside the house was a civilization almost three thousand years in the future, with all the wonders that man would dream up during those years; but Ronald didn't even glance toward the windows. He was looking, right now, at the most marvelous woman in any age. . .

"Say, young man," Mr. Taine interrupted. "I forgot about you. I'll have to see about sending you home."

Ronald looked up slowly. "Yes," he sighed. "Though I could stay on here. . . ."

Mr. Taine's smile froze. Mrs. Taine gasped, and even Lilian stared at him in dismay. Nora squeezed his arm.

"What's the matter?" Ronald said. "Have I said something wrong? Why can't I stay here if I want to?"

"Ronald," Nora said softly. "Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

Then she laughed, gayly, with a light in her eyes that he hadn't seen there before. "So it's different in your time," she said. "I should have guessed it."

The others were still staring at him, and he realized suddenly that their look was mostly one of pity. Even Lilian was pitying him.

"What's different?" he said.

Nora took his hand and held it tightly. "Look at them," she said. "Mother. Father. Junior. Lilian."

He looked at them. They no longer seemed so strange, so outlandish, though they were thin and gawky and altogether the homeliest family he had ever seen. But of course he was used to them by now. . . .

"They're normal," Nora said. "And we're freaks. Both of us, though I'm more of one than you, actually."

"LOOK," the real-estate agent said. "I'm telling you what I saw. He went into this house. . . ."

"The house that wasn't there. I know. I know." The policeman shook his head. "You better go on home for a while."

"But it's just around the corner. You've got to believe me, officer."

"Sure, I believe you. A house came down on a vacant lot and your client

went in and it flew away with him. You better go on home and rest for a while."

The real-estate agent mopped his forehead. He realized now that he had been foolish, telling the policeman. It wasn't the sort of story that anyone would believe. In fact, he didn't even believe it himself, exactly, any more.

They turned the corner and started down toward the end of the subdivision. Ahead of them were four Plan B type houses on one side of the street and the vacant lot on the other. The agent sighed. It was, after all, a very hot day.

"Well," said the policeman, "you were right about a house being there, anyway. Funny, I don't remember anyone getting a permit to bring one in along this street."

The agent looked up, slowly. He knew even before he saw it that it would be a Moorish type house with a well-tended rose garden. It was.

"I'll have to check on this," the policeman said.

The door of the house opened and two people came out. The real-estate agent swallowed. One was very definitely the young man—Brisbane— who had vanished along with the house. The other was a girl in a very brief dress. . . .

"Oh, hello there," Ronald Brisbane called out. "You're just the man I want—"

The agent backed off a couple of steps, then remembered that there was a policeman along. "Yes?" he said.

"I want to buy a house," Ronald Brisbane said.

"That one? I don't. . . ."

Ronald frowned. "No, not that one."

"Say, lady," the policeman said. "Don't you know there's a city ordinance against—well, against—I mean, don't you know that. . . ."

He turned a bit redder and looked up, with an effort, at Nora's face. She smiled.

"She's my wife," Ronald said belligerently. "We were just married and I haven't had time to buy her any clothes."

The agent groaned. Ronald glanced back at him. "Oh, yes, the house," he said. "No, I want one of those."

He strode across the street, with Nora right beside him. He crossed the sidewalk in front of House 22, went up the flagstone walk and paused at the door.

"We'll take this one," he said. "And where's the justice of the peace? I think we'd better get married again. I don't know if ours is legal now."

The agent looked over at the policeman, but his attention was fastened on Nora's tunic.

"I thought you didn't like these houses," the agent said weakly.

"I like them now," Ronald said fervently. "Don't you, darling?"

She smiled up at him. "Oh yes," she whispered. "I love this house, Ronald."

The real-estate agent choked suddenly. When he looked up again, Ronald Brisbane was just carrying his bride across the threshold.

"Love," the policeman said. "It's a wonderful thing, isn't it?" He shrugged. "So there's a house brought in without a permit. So what? I'm not going to bother them about it." He walked off.

The agent stood on the lawn of House 22 and watched until the policeman was almost to the corner. Then, slowly and with great determination, he strode across the street and up the path through the rose garden. He was going to find out, once and for all, whether or not the house was real.

Once he looked back toward the policeman, but he had already turned the corner. The agent shrugged and tried the door handle. It wasn't locked. He took a deep breath, noticing how particularly sweet this kind of roses smelled, and pulled the door open. . . .

Ronald and Nora paused just inside the doorway of their new, quite ordinary, absolutely stationary, and wholly desirable house. After they had kissed, and kissed again, Nora drew away.

"I want to wave goodbye to the family," she said.

They went to the window. Ronald smiled ruefully. "We're too late," he said. Across the street was nothing but a vacant lot. ● ● ●

THE VEIL OF

FOREWORD

A LITTLE OVER a year ago, Solar Arbitrary Time, a message rocket dropped into the receiving chute at the Interworld Space Authority headquarters on Mars.

In it was a manuscript, telling a story so strange and terrible that it was difficult to believe that any sane human being could have been guilty of such crimes.

However, through a year of careful investigation, the story has been authenticated beyond doubt, and now the ISA has authorized its release to the public, just exactly as it was taken from the battered rocket.

The Veil—the light that came from nowhere to swallow ships—has disappeared, Spacemen all over the Solar System, tramp traders and captains of luxury liners alike, have welcomed this knowledge as only men can who have lived in constant peril. The Veil is gone, and with some of the crushing terror of the Alien Beyond.

We know its full name now—the Veil of Astellar.

We know the place of its origin; a world outlawed from space and time. We know the reason for its being. Through this story, written in the agony of one man's soul, we know these things—and we know the manner of the Veil's destruction.

I

THERE had been a brawl at Madam Kan's, on the Jekkara Low-Canal. Some little Martian glory-holer had got too high on thil, and pretty soon the spiked knuckle-dusters they use around there began to flash, and the little Martian had pulled his last feed-valve.

They threw what was left of him out onto the stones of the embarkment almost at my feet. I suppose that was why I stopped—because I had to, or trip over him. And then I started.

The thin red sunlight came down out of a clear green sky. Red sand whispered in the desert beyond the city walls, and red-brown water ran slow and sullen in the canal. The Martian lay twisted over on his back, with his torn

They walked in orderly fashion but looked as if they were in a trance

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THE VEIL OF ASTELLAR

A Novelet by LEIGH BRACKETT

It took courage to die—and it took three hundred years to build up that courage. . . .

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throat spilling the reddest red of all across the dirty stones.

He was dead. He had green eyes, wide open, and he was dead.

I stood by him. I don't know how long. There wasn't any time. No sunlight shimmered now, no sense of people passing, no sound—nothing!

Nothing but his dead face looking up at me, green-eyed, with his lips pulled back off his white teeth.

I didn't know him. Alive, he was just another Martian snipe. Dead, he was just meat.

Dead, the Martian trash!

No time. Just a dead man's face, smiling.

And then something touched me. Thought, a sudden bursting flame of it, hit my mind, drawing it back like a magnet drawing heavy steel. Somebody's thought, directed at me. A raw, sick horror, a fear, and a compassion so deep it shook my heart. One clear, sharp thrust of word-images came to me now.

"He looks like Lucifer crying for Heaven," the message said. "His eyes. Oh, Dark Angel, his eyes!"

I shut those eyes. Sweat broke cold on me, I swayed, and then I made the world come back into focus again. Sunlight, sand, noise and stench and people crowding, the thunder of rockets from the spaceport two Mars miles away. All in focus. I looked up and saw the girl.

SHE was standing just beyond the dead man, almost touching him. There was a young fellow with her. I saw him vaguely, but he didn't matter then. Nothing mattered but the girl. She was wearing a blue dress, and she was staring at me with a smoke-gray gaze out of a face as white as striped bone.

The sunlight and the noise and people went away again, leaving me alone with her. I felt the locket burn me under my spaceman's black, and my heart seemed to stop beating.

"Missy," I said. "Missy."

"Like Lucifer. but Lucifer turned saint," her mind was saying.

I laughed of a sudden, short and harsh. The world came back in place and stayed there, and so did I.

Missy. Missy, bosh! Missy's been dead a long, long time.

It was the red hair that fooled me. The same dark red hair, straight and heavy as a horse's tail, coiled on her white neck, and her smoke-gray eyes. Something, too, about her freckles and the way her mouth pulled up on one side as though it couldn't stop smiling.

Otherwise, she didn't look much like Missy. She was taller and bonier. Life had kicked her around some, and she showed it. Missy never had worn that tired, grim look. I don't know whether she had developed a tough, unbreakable character, such as the girl before me, either. I couldn't read minds, then.

This girl, looking at me, had a lot in her mind that she wouldn't want known. I didn't like the idea of her catching me in a rare off-moment.

"What do you babies think you're doing here?" I said.

The young man answered me. He was a lot like her—plain, simple, a lot tougher inside than he looked—a kid who had learned how to take punishment and go on fighting. He was sick now, and angry, and a little scared.

"We thought, in broad daylight it would be safe," he answered.

"Day or night, it's all the same to this hole. I'd get out."

Without moving, the girl was still looking at me, not even realizing that she was doing it. "White hair," she was thinking. "But he isn't old. Not much older than Brad, in spite of the lines. Suffering, not age."

"You're off the Queen of Jupiter, aren't you? I asked them.

I knew they were. The Queen was the only passenger tub in Jekkara then. I was interested only because she looked like Missy. But Missy had been dead a long time.

The young man she thought of as Brad spoke.

"Yes," he said. "We're going out to Jupiter, to the colonies." He pulled at the girl gently. "Come on, Virgie. We'd better go back to the ship."

I was sweating, and cold. Colder than the corpse at my feet. I laughed, but not loud.

"Yes," I said. "Get back to the ship, where it's safe."

The girl stirred, hadn't taken her eyes off me.

Still afraid, not so compassionate now, but still with her mind on me.

"His eyes burn," she was thinking. "What color are they? No color, really. Just dark and cold and burning. They've looked into horror—and heaven. . . ."

"Then maybe that's where I noticed you." She turned the wedding ring on her finger, not thinking about it, and frowned. "What's your name?"

"Goat," I said. "J. Goat."

"Jay Goat," she repeated. "What an odd name. But it's not unusual. I wonder why it interests me so much."

"Come on, Virgie," Brad said crossly.

I didn't give her any help. I looked at her until she flushed crimson and turned away. I read her thoughts. They were worth reading.

She and Brad went off toward the spaceport, walking close together, back to the Queen of Jupiter, and I stumbled over the dead Martian at my feet.

Through the Veil

BEYOND our known world lies more than the sky. There waits the Unknown, the Unguessable, hidden in the unfathomable black depths of space. In capturing this sense of mystery, of creating strange new worlds alive with their own glitter and romance, few writers can touch Leigh Brackett.

This is basically a story of menace. But woven through it, like sparkling threads, you will feel those touches of pure color, that commanding gift of visualization, which makes her most imaginative flights come alive and real. Realists would call this an improbable story and so it is. But it is imagination at its gorgeous best.

—The Editor

I let her look into them. She flushed after a while, and I smiled. She was angry, but she couldn't look away, and I held her, smiling, until the young man pulled her again, not so gently.

"Come on, Virgie."

She broke free from me then, turning with an angular, coltish grace. My stomach felt like somebody stabbed it, suddenly. The way she held her head. . . .

She looked back at me, sullenly, not wanting to.

"You remind me of someone," she said. "Are you from the Queen of Jupiter, too?"

Her voice was like Missy's. Deeper maybe. Throatier. But enough like it.

"Yeah. Spaceman. First Class."

The pinched grayness had crawled in over his face. His green eyes were glazed and already sunken, and his blood was turning dark on the stones. Just another corpse.

I laughed. I put my black boot under the twist of his back and pushed him off into the sullen, red-brown water, and I laughed because my own blood was still hot and beating in me so hard it hurt.

He was dead, so I let him go.

I smiled at the splash and the fading ripples. "She was wrong," I thought. "It isn't Jay. It's just plain J. Goat. J for Judas."

THERE were about ten Mars hours to kill before the Queen blasted off. I

had a good run at the getak tables in Madam Kan's. She found me some special desert-cactus brandy and a Venusian girl with a hide like polished emerald and golden eyes.

She danced for me, and she knew how. It wasn't a bad ten hours, for a Jekkara dive.

Missy, the dead Martian, and the girl named Virgie went down in my subconscious where they belonged, and didn't leave even a ripple. Things like that are like the pain of an old wound when you twist. They get you for a minute, but they don't last. They aren't important any more.

Things can change. You planet-bound people build your four little walls of thought and roof them in with convention, and you think there's nothing else. But space is big, and there are other worlds and other ways. You can learn them. Even you. Try it, and see.

I finished the fiery green brandy. I filled the hollow between the Venusian dancer's emerald breasts with Martian silver and kissed her, and went away with a faint taste of fish on my lips, back toward the spaceport.

I walked. It was night, with a thin, cold wind rustling the sand and the low moons spilling silver and wild black shadows across the dunes. I could see my aura glowing, pale gold against the silver.

I felt swell. The only thing I thought about concerning the Queen of Jupiter was that pretty soon my job would be finished and I'd be paid.

I stretched with a pleasure you wouldn't know anything about, and it was a wonderful thing to be alive.

It was lonely out there on the moon-swept desert a mile from the spaceport, when Gallery stepped out from behind a ruined tower that might have been a lighthouse once, when the desert was a sea.

Gallery was king-snipe of the glory hole. He was Black Irish, and moderately drunk, and his extra-sensory perception was quivering in him like a sensitive diaphragm. I knew he could see my aura. Very faintly, and not with his eyes, but enough. I knew he had seen it the first time he met me, when I signed aboard the Queen of Jupiter on Venus.

You meet them like that occasionally. Celts especially, and Romanies, both Earth and Martian, and a couple of tribes of Venusians. Extra-sensory perception is born into them. Mostly it's crude, but it can get in your way.

It was in my way now. Gallery had four inches on me, and about thirty pounds, and the whisky he'd drunk was just enough to make him fast, mean, and dangerous. His fists were large.

"You ain't human," he said softly.

He was smiling. He might have been making love to me, with his smile and his beautiful soft voice. The sweat on his face made it look like polished wood in the moonlight.

"No, Gallery," I said. "Not any more. Not for a long time."

He swayed slightly, over his flexed knees. I could see his eyes. The blueness was washed out of them by the moonlight. There was only fear left, hard and shining.

His voice was still soft, still singing. "What are you, then? And what will you be wantin' with the ship?"

"Nothing with the ship, Gallery. Only with the people on her. And as to what I am, what difference does it make?"

"None," said Gallery. "None. Because I'm going to kill you, now."

I laughed, not making any sound.

He nodded his black head slowly. "Show me your teeth, if you will. You'll be showin' them to the desert sky soon, out of a picked skull."

He opened his hands. The racing moonlight showed me a silver crucifix in each of his palms.

"No, Gallery," I said softly. "Maybe you could call me a vampire, but I'm not that kind."

He closed his hands again over the crosses and started forward, one slow step at a time. I could hear his boots in the blowing sand. I didn't move.

"You can't kill me, Gallery."

He didn't stop. He didn't speak. The sweat was trickling down his skin. He was afraid, but he didn't stop.

"Go on to the town, Gallery. Hide there till the Queen's gone. You'll be safe. Do you love the others enough to die for them?"

He stopped, then. He frowned, like a puzzled kid. It was a new thought.

I got the answer before he said it.

"What does love have to do with it? They're people."

He came on again, and I opened my eyes, wide.

"Gallery," I said.

HE WAS close. Close enough to smell the raw whisky on his breath. I looked up into his face. I caught his eyes and held them, and he stopped, slowly, dragging his feet as though all of a sudden there were weights on them.

I held his eyes. I could hear his thoughts. They were the same. They're always the same.

He raised his fists up, too slowly, as though he might be lifting a man's weight on each of them. His lips drew back. I could see the wet shine of his teeth and hear the labored breath go between them, hoarse and rough.

I smiled at him, and held his eyes with mine.

He went down to his knees. Inch by inch, fighting me, but down. A big man with sweat on his face and blue eyes that couldn't look away. His hands opened. The silver crosses fell out and lay there glittering on the sand.

His head went back. The cords roped out in his neck and jerked, and then suddenly he fell over on his side and lay still.

"My heart," he whispered. "You've stopped it."

That's the only way. What they feel about us is instinct, and even psychosurgery won't touch that. Besides, there's never time.

He couldn't breathe, now. He couldn't speak, but I heard his thoughts. I picked the crucifixes out of the sand and folded his fingers over them.

He managed to turn his head a little and look at me. He tried to speak, but again it was his thought I answered.

"Into the Veil, Gallery," I whispered. "That's where I'm leading the Queen."

I saw his eyes widen and fix. The last thought he had was—well, never mind that. I dragged him back into the ruined tower where no one would be likely to find him for a long time, and started on again for the spaceport. And then I stopped.

He'd dropped the crosses again. They were lying in the path with the moonlight on them, and I picked them up, thinking I'd throw them out into the blowing sand where they wouldn't be seen.

I didn't. I stood holding them. They didn't burn my flesh. I laughed.

Yeah. I laughed. But I couldn't look at them.

I went back in the tower and stretched Gallery on his back with his hand crossed on his chest, and closed his eyes. I laid a crucifix on each of his eyelids and went out, this time for good.

Shirina said once that you could never understand a human mind completely no matter how well you knew it. That's where the suffering comes in. You feel fine, everything's beautiful, and then all of a sudden a trapdoor comes open somewhere in your brain, and you remember.

Not often, and you learn to kick them shut, fast. But even so, Flack is the only one of us that still has dark hair, and he never had a soul to begin with.

Well, I kicked the door shut on Gallery and his crosses, and half an hour later the Queen of Jupiter blasted off for the Jovian colonies, and a landing she was never going to make.

II

NOTHING happened until we hit the outer fringe of the Asteroid Belt. I'd kept watch on the minds of my crew-

mates, and I knew Gallery hadn't mentioned me to anyone else. You don't go around telling people that the guy in the next bunk gives off a yellow glow and isn't human, unless you want to wind up in a straightjacket. Especially when such things are something you sense but can't see, like electricity.

When we came into the danger zone inside the Belt, they set the precautionary watches at the emergency locks on the passenger decks, and I was assigned to one of them. I went up to take my station.

Just at the top of the companionway I felt the first faint reaction of my skin, and my aura began to pulse and brighten.

I went on to the Number Two lock and sat down.

I hadn't been on the passenger deck before. The Queen of Jupiter was an old tub from the Triangle trade, refitted for deep-space hauling. She held together, and that's all. She was carrying a heavy cargo of food, seed, clothing and farm supplies, and about five hundred families trying for a fresh start in the Jovian colonies.

I remembered the first time I saw Jupiter. The first time any man from Earth ever saw Jupiter. That was long ago.

Now the deck was jammed. Men, women, kids, mattresses, bags, bundles and what have you. Martians, Venusians, Terrans, all piled in together, making a howling racket and smelling very high in the combined heat of the sun and the press of bodies.

My skin was tingling and beginning to crawl. The aura was brighter.

I saw the girl. The girl named Virgie with her thick red hair and her colt's way of moving. She and her husband were minding a wiry, green-eyed Martian baby while its mother tried to sleep, and they were both thinking the same thing.

"Maybe, some day when things are better, we'll have one of our own."

I remember thinking that Missy would have looked like that holding our kid, if we'd ever had one.

My aura pulsed and glowed.

I watched the little worlds flash by, still far ahead of the ship, all sizes, from pebbles to habitable planetoids, glittering in the raw sunlight and black as space on their shadow sides. People crowded up around the ports, and I got to looking at one old man standing almost beside me.

He had space stamped all over him, in the way he carried his lean frame and the lines in his leathery face, and the hungry-hound look in his eyes watching the Belt. An old rocket-rustler who had done plenty in his day, and remembered it all.

And then Virgie came up. Of all the women on deck it had to be Virgie. Brad was with her, and she was still holding the baby. She had her back to me, looking out.

"It's wonderful," she said softly. "Oh, Brad, just look at it!"

"Wonderful, and deadly," the old spaceman said to himself. He looked around and smiled at Virgie. "Your first trip out?"

"Yes, for both of us. I suppose we're very starry-eyed about it, but it's strange." She made a little helpless gesture.

"I know. There aren't any words for it." He turned back to the port. His voice and his face were blank, but I could read his mind.

"I used to kick the supply ships through to the first settlement, fifty years ago," he said. "There were ten of us, doing that. I'm the only one left."

"The Belt was dangerous then, before they got the Rosson deflectors," Brad said.

"The Belt," said the old man softly, "only got three of them."

Virgie lifted her red head. "Then what. . . ."

"The old man didn't hear her. His thoughts were way off.

"Six of the best men in space, and

then, eleven years ago, my son," he said, to no one.

A woman standing beside him turned her head. I saw the wide, raw shine of terror in her eyes, and the sudden stiffness of her lips.

"The Veil?" she whispered. "That's what you mean, isn't it?"

The old man tried to shut her up, but Virgie broke in.

"What about the Veil?" she asked. "I've heard of it, vaguely. What is it?"

The Martian baby was absorbed in a silver chain she wore around her neck. I remember thinking it looked familiar. Probably she'd had it on the first time I saw her. My aura glowed, a hot bright gold.

THE woman's voice, answering, had an eerie quality of distance in it, like an echo. She was staring out of the port now.

"Nobody knows," she said. "It can't be found or traced, or tested at all. My brother is a spaceman. He saw it once from a great distance, reaching from nowhere to swallow a ship. A veil of light. It faded, and the ship was gone! My brother saw it out here, close to the Belt."

"There's no reason to expect it here more than anywhere else," the old spaceman said roughly. "It's taken ships as far in as Earth's orbit. There's no reason to be afraid."

My aura burned around me like a cloud of golden light, and my skin was alive with a subtle current.

The green-eyed Martian baby yanked the silver chain suddenly and crowed, holding its hands high. The thing on the end of the chain, that had been hidden under Virgie's chain, that had been hidden under Virgie's dress, spun slowly 'round and 'round, and drew my eyes, and held them.

I must have made some sound, because Virgie looked around and saw me. I don't know what she thought. I didn't know anything for a long time, except that I was cold, as though some of the dead, black space outside had come in through the port somehow and touched me.

The shiny thing spun on the end of the silver chain, and the green-eyed baby watched it, and I watched it.

After that there was darkness, with me standing in the middle of it quite still, and cold, cold, cold!

Virgie's voice came through the darkness, calm, casual, as though none of it mattered at all.

"I've remembered who it is you made me think of, Mr. Goat." she said. "I'm afraid I was rather rude that day on Mars, but the resemblance puzzled me. Look."

A white object came into my shell of ice and blackness. It was a strong white hand reddened across the knuckles with work, holding something in the palm. Something that burned with a clear, terrible light of its own. Her voice went on, so very quietly.

"This locket, Mr. Goat. It's ancient. Over three hundred years old. It belonged to an ancestor of mine, and the family has kept it ever since. It's rather a lovely story. She married a young spaceman. In those days, of course, space flight was still new and dangerous, and this young man loved it as much as he did his wife. His name was Stephen Vance. That's his picture. That's why I thought I had seen you somewhere before, and why I asked your name. I think the resemblance is quite striking, don't you?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, it is."

"The girl is his wife, and of course, the original owner of the locket. He called her Missy. It's engraved on the back of the locket. Anyway, he had a chance to make the first flight from Mars to Jupiter, and Missy knew how much it meant to him. She knew that something of him would die if he didn't go, and so she let him. He didn't know how soon the baby they'd both wanted so much would arrive, for she didn't tell him that. Because she knew he wouldn't go if she did.

"So Stephen had two lockets made, this one and another just like it. He told her they'd make a link between them, he and Missy, that nothing could break. Sometime, somehow, he'd come back to her, no matter what happened. Then he went to Jupiter. He died there. His ship was never found.

"But Missy went on wearing the locket and praying. And when she died she gave it to her daughter. It grew into a sort of family tradition. That's why I have it now."

Her voice trailed off, drowsily, with a faint note of surprise. Her hand and the locket went away, and there was a great stillness all around me, a great peace.

I brought my arms up across my face. I stiffened, and I tried to say something, words wouldn't come. They won't, when you go into the Beyond Place.

I took my hands away, and I could see again. I didn't touch the locket around my neck. I could feel it against my breast, like the cold of space, searing me.

Virgie lay at my feet. She still held the baby in the bend of one arm. Its round brown face was turned to hers, smiling a little. Brad lay beside them, and one arm flung across them both.

The locket lay on the gentle curve of Virgie's breast, face up, still open, rising and falling slowly to the lift of her breathing.

They don't suffer. Remember that. They don't suffer. They don't even know. They sleep, and their dreams are happy. Remember, please! Not one of them has suffered, or been afraid.

I STOOD alone in that silent ship. There were no stars beyond the port now, no little worlds riding the Belt. There was only a veil of light wrapped close around the ship, a soft web of green and purple and gold and blue spun on a shimmering gray woof that was not color at all, and held there with threads of scarlet.

There was the familiar dimming of the electrics inside the ship. The people slept on the broad deck. I could hear their breathing, soft and slow and peaceful. My aura burned like a golden cloud around me, and inside it my body beat and pulsed with life.

I looked down at the locket, at Missy's face. If you'd told me. Oh Missy, if you'd only told me, I could have saved you!

Virgie's red hair, dark and straight and heavy in her white neck. Virgie's smoke-gray eyes, half open and dreaming. Missy's hair. Missy's eyes.

Mine. Part of my flesh, part of my bone, part of my blood. Part of the life that still beat and pulsed inside me.

Three hundred years.

"Oh, if I could only pray!" I thought.

I knelt down beside her. I put out my hand. The golden light came out of the flesh and veiled her face. I took my hand away and got up, slowly. More slowly than Gallery fell when he died.

The shimmer of the Veil was all through the ship, now. In the air, in every atom of its wood and metal. I moved in it, a shining golden thing, alive and young, in a silent, sleeping world.

Three hundred years, and Missy was dead, and now the locket had brought her back.

Did Judas feel like this when the rope tore the life out of him?

But Judas died.

I walked in the silence, wrapped in my golden cloud, and my heartbeats shook me like the blows of a man's fist. A strong heart. A young, strong heart.

The ship swerved slowly, drawn out of its arch of free fall toward Jupiter. The auxiliaries had not been cut in yet for the Belt. The Veil just *sloed* around the hull and drew it, easily.

It's just an application of will-power. Teleportation, the strength of mind and thought amplified by the X-crystals and directed like a radio beam. The release of energy between the force of thought and the force of gravity causes the light, the visible thing that space-

men call the Veil. The hypnotic sleep-impulse is sent the same way, through the X-crystals on Astellar.

Shirina says it's a simple thing, a child's trick, in its own space-time matrix. All it requires is a focal point to guide it, a special vibration it can follow like a torch in the void, such as the aura around flesh, human or not, that has bathed in the Cloud.

A Judas goat, to lead the sheep to slaughter.

I walked in my golden light. The pleasure of subtle energies pricked and flared across my skin. I was going home.

And Missy was still alive. Three hundred years, and she was still alive. Her blood and mine, alive together in a girl named Virgie.

And I was taking her to Astellar, the world its own dimension didn't want.

I guess it was the stopping of the current across my skin that roused me, half an eternity later. My aura had paled to its normal faintness. I heard the faint grating ring of metal on stone, and I knew the Queen of Jupiter had made her last landing. I was home.

I was sitting on the edge of my own bunk. I didn't know how I got there. I was holding my head on my clenched fists, and when I opened them my own locket fell out. There was blood on my palms.

I got up and walked through the silence, through the hard impersonal glare of the electrics, to the nearest airlock, and went out.

The Queen of Jupiter lay in a rounded cradle of rock, worn smooth. Back at the top of the chute the space doors were closed, and the last echo of the air pumps was dying away against the low roof of the cavern. The rock in a pale translucent green, carved and polished into beauty that stabs you breathless, no matter how many times you see it.

ASTELLAR is a little world, only about half the size of Vesta. Outside it's nothing but black slag, without even a trace of mineral to attract a tramp miner. When they want to, they can bend the light around it so that the finest spacescope can't find it, and the same thought-force that makes the Veil can move Astellar where they wish it to go.

Since traffic through the Belt has grown fairly heavy, they haven't moved it much. They haven't had to.

I went across the cavern in the pale green light. There's a wide ramp that goes up from the floor like the sweep of an angel's wing. Flack was waiting for me near the foot of it, outlined in the faint gold of his aura.

"Hi, Steve," he said, and looked at the Queen of Jupiter with his queer grey eyes. His hair was as black as mine used to be, his skin space-burned dark and leathery. His eyes looked out of the darkness like pale spots of moonlight, faintly luminous and without a soul.

I knew Flack before he became one of us, and I thought then that he was less human than the Astellarians.

"A good haul this time, Steve?" he asked.

"Yeah." I tried to get past him. He caught my arm.

"Hey—what's eating you?" he asked.

"Nothing."

I shook him off. He smiled and stepped in front of me. A big man, as big as Gallery and a lot tougher, with a mind that could meet mine on an equal footing.

"Don't give me that, Stevie. Something's—he-ey!" He pushed my chin up suddenly, and his pale eyes glowed and narrowed.

"What's this?" he said. "Tears?"

He stared at me a minute, slack-jawed, and then he began to laugh. I hit him.

III

FLACK went sprawling backward onto the lucent stone. I went by him up the curve of the ramp. I went fast,

but it was already too late.

The airlocks of the Queen of Jupiter opened behind me.

I stopped. I stopped the way Gallery did in the blowing Martian sand, slowly, dragging weights on my feet. I didn't want to. I didn't want to turn around, but there was nothing I could do about it. My body turned, by itself.

Flack was on his feet again, leaning up against the carved green wall, looking at me. Blood ran out over his lip and down his chin. He got out a handkerchief and held it over his mouth, and his eyes never left me, pale and still and glowing. The golden aura made a halo round his dark head, like the painting of a saint.

Beyond him the locks of the ship were open, and the people were coming out.

In their niche on the fourth level of Astellar the X-crystals were pulsing from pale gray to a black as endless and alien as the Coal Sack. Behind them was a mind, kindly and gentle, thinking, and the human cargo of the Queen heard its thoughts.

They came out of the locks, walking steadily but without haste. They formed into a loose column and came across the green translucent floor of the cavern and up the ramp. Walking easily, their breathing deep and quiet, their eyes half open and full of dreams.

Up the long sweeping ribbon of pale green stone, past Flack, past me, and into the hall beyond. They didn't see anything but their dreams. They smiled a little. They were happy, and not afraid.

Virgie still carried the baby, drowsing in her arms, and Brad was still beside her. The locket had turned with her movements, hiding the pictures, showing me only its silver back.

I watched them go. The hall beyond the ramp was gem-cut from milky crystal and inlaid with metals that came from another dimension, radioactive metals that filled the crystal walls and the air between them with softened, misty fire.

They went slowly into the veil of mist and fire, and were gone.

Flack spoke softly. "Steve."

I turned back toward the sound of his voice. There was a strange blur over everything, but I could see the yellow glow of his aura, the dark strength of him outlined against the pale green rock. He hadn't moved. He hadn't taken his cold light away from me.

I had left my mind naked, unguarded, and I knew before he spoke that Flack had read it.

He spoke through his bruised lips.

"You're thinking you won't go into the Cloud again, because of that girl," he whispered. "You're thinking there must be some way to save her if you could. And you'll go into the Cloud again, Stevie. Twelve hours from now, when it's time, you'll walk into the Cloud with the rest of us. And do you know why?"

His voice grew soft as the touch of a dove, with a sound of laughter under it.

"Because you're afraid to die, Stevie, just like the rest of us. Even me, Flack, the guy that never had a soul. I never believed in any God but myself and I love life. But sometimes I look at a corpse lying in the street of some human sink-hole and curse it with all my heart because it didn't have to be afraid.

"You'll go into the Cloud, because the Cloud is all that keeps you alive. And you won't care about the red-haired girl, Stevie. You won't care if it was Missy herself giving her life to you, because you're afraid. We're not human any longer, Stevie. We've gone beyond. We've sinned—sins there aren't even any names for in this dimension. And no matter what we believe in, or deny, we're afraid.

"Afraid to die, Stevie. All of us. Afraid to die!"

His words frightened me. I couldn't forget them. I was remembering them even when I saw Shirina.

"I've found a new dimension, Stevie," Shirina said lazily. "A little one, be-

tween the Eighth and Ninth. It's so little we missed it before. We'll explore it, after the Cloud."

She led me into our favorite room. It was cut from a crystal so black and deep that it was like being in outer space, and if you looked long enough you could see strange nebulae, far off, and galaxies that never were except in dreams.

"How long before it's time?" I asked her.

"An hour, perhaps less. Poor Stevie. It'll be over soon, and you'll forget."

HER mind touched mine gently, with an intimate sweetness and comfort far beyond the touch of hands. She'd been doing that for hours, soothing the fever and the pain out of my thoughts. I lay without moving, sprawled on a couch so soft it was like a cloud. I could see the glow and shimmer of Shirina against the darkness without turning my head.

I don't know how to describe Shirina. Physically she was close enough to humanity. The difference in structure were more subtle than mere shape. They were—well, they were right, and exotic, and beautiful in a way there aren't any words for.

She, and her race, had no need of clothing. Their lazy, sinuous bodies had a fleecy covering that wasn't fur or feathers or tendrils but something of all three. They had no true color. They changed according to light, in an endless spectrum of loveliness that went far beyond the range you humans know.

Now, in the dark, Shirina's aura glowed like warm pearl. I could see her face, faintly, the queer peaked triangular bones covered with skin softer than humming-bird's breast, the dead-black, bottomless eyes, the crest of delicate antennae tipped with tiny balls of light like diamonds burning under gauze.

Her thoughts clung around me gently. "There's no need to worry, Stevie," she was thinking. "The girl will go last. It's all arranged. You will enter the Cloud first of all, and there won't be the smallest vibration of her to touch you."

"But she'll touch somebody, Shirina," I groaned. "And it makes it all different, somehow, even with the others. Time doesn't seem to mean much. She's —she's like my own kid."

Shirina answered aloud, patiently. "But she isn't. Your daughter was born three hundred years ago. Three hundred years, that is, for your body. For you there isn't any reckoning. Time is different in every direction. We've spent a thousand years in some of them, and more than that."

Yes. I could remember those alien years. Dimensional walls are no barrier to thought. You lie under the X-crystals and watch them pulse from mist-gray to depthless black. Your mind is sucked out of you and projected along a tight beam of carefully planned vibration, and presently you're in another space, another time.

You can take over any body that pleases you, for as long as you want. You can go between planets, between suns, between galaxies, just by thinking about it. You can see things, do things, taste experiences that all the languages of our space-time continuum put together have no words for.

Shirina and I had done a lot of wandering, a lot of seeing, and a lot of tasting. And the interlocking universes are infinite.

"I can't help worrying, Shirina," I told her. "I don't want to feel like this, but I can't help it. Right now I'm human. Just plain Steve Vance of Beverly Hills, California, on the planet Earth. I can't bear my memories.

My throat closed up. I was sick, and covered with cold sweat, and closer to going crazy than ever before in all my Satan-knows-how-many years.

Shirina's voice came through the darkness. It was like a birdcall, a flute, a ripple of water over stones, and like nothing that any of you ever heard or ever will hear

"Stevie," she said. "Listen to me. You're not human any more. You haven't been human since the first time you walked in the Cloud. You have no more contact with those people than they have with the beasts they raise for slaughter."

"But I can't help remembering."

"All right. Remember, then. Remember how from birth you were different from other men. How you had to go on and out, to see things no man had ever seen before, to fight space itself with your heart and your ship and your two hands."

I could recall it. The first man to dare the Belt, the first man to see Jupiter blazing in his swarm of moons.

"That's why, when we caught you in the Veil and brought you to Astellar, we saved you from the Cloud. You had something rare—a strength, a sweep of vision and desire. You could give us something we wanted, an easier contact with human ships. And in return, we gave you life and freedom."

She paused, and added softly. "And myself, Stevie."

Shirina sighed. "They called us vammingled in our thoughts. Emotions born of alien bodies we had shared. Memories of battle and beauty, of terror and love, under suns that never burned afterward, even in one's dreams. I can't explain it. There aren't any words.

"Shirina, help me!"

SHIRINA'S mind cradled mine like a mother's arms.

"You weren't to blame in the beginning, Stevie. We did it to you under hypnosis, so that your brain could assimilate the change gradually, without shock. I led you myself into our world, like someone leading a child, and when you were finally freed, much time had passed. You had gone beyond humanity. Far beyond."

"I could have stopped. I could have refused to go into the Cloud again, when I knew what it was. I could have refused to be a Judas goat, leading the sheep to slaughter."

"Then why didn't you?"

"Because I had what I wanted," I said slowly. "What I'd always wanted and never had a name for. Power and freedom such as no man ever had. I liked having it. When I thought about you and the things we could do together, and the things I could do alone, I'd have led the whole Solar System into the Veil, and be hanged to it."

I drew a harsh, tight breath and wiped the sweat from my palms.

"And besides, I didn't feel human any longer. I wouldn't hurt them any more than I'd have mistreated a dog when I was still a man. But I didn't belong to them any more."

"Then why is it different now?"

"I don't know. It just is. When I think of Virgie going under the crystals, and me walking in the Cloud, it's too much."

"You've seen their bodies, afterward," Shirina said gently. "Not one atom is touched, or changed, and they smile. There's no easier or kinder death in Creation."

"I know," I said. "I know. But Virgie is my own."

She'd walk under the X-crystals, smiling, with her red hair dark and shining and her smoke-gray eyes half open and full of dreams. She'd still have the baby in her arms, and Brad would walk beside her. And the X-crystals would pulse and burn with black strange fires, and she would lie down, still smiling, and that would be all.

All, forever, for Virgie and Brad and the green-eyed Martian baby.

But the life that had been in their bodies, the force that no man has a name for that makes the breath and blood and heat of living flesh, the ultimate vibration of the human soul—that lifeforce would rise up from the crystals, up into the chamber of the Cloud. And Shirina, and Shirina's people, and the four other men like me that weren't human any longer, would

walk in it so that we could live.

It hadn't really hit me before. It doesn't. You think of it at first, but it doesn't mean anything. There's no semantic referent for "soul" or "ego" or "lifeforce." You don't see anything —you don't have any contact with the dead. You don't even think much of death.

All you know is you walk into a radiant Cloud, and you feel like a god, and you don't think of the human side of it because you aren't human any longer.

"No wonder they threw you out of your own dimension!" I cried out.

Shirina sighed. "They called us vampires; parasites—sybaritic monsters who lived only for sensation and pleasure. And they cast us into darkness. Well, perhaps they were right. I don't know. But we never hurt or frightened anyone, and when I think of the things they did to their own people, in blood and fear and hate, I'm terrified."

She rose and came and stood over me, glowing like warm pearl against the space-deep crystal. The tiny tips of diamond fire burned on her antennae, and her eyes were like black stars.

I put out my hands to her. She took them, and her touch broke down my control. I was crying suddenly, not making any sound.

"Right or wrong, Stevie, you're one of us now," she said gently. "I'm sorry this happened. I would have spared you, if you'd let me put your mind to sleep until it was over. But you've got to understand that. You left them, the humans, behind you, and you can never, never go back."

"After a long time I spoke. "I know, I understand."

I felt her sigh and shiver, and then she drew back, still holding my hands.

"It's time now, Stevie."

I got up, slowly, and then I stopped. Shirina caught her breath suddenly.

"Steve, my hands! You're hurting me!"

I let them go. "Flack," I said, not talking to anybody. "He knew my weakness. At the root and base, no matter how much I talk, I'm going into the Cloud again because I'm afraid. That's why I'll always go into the Cloud when it's time. Because I've sinned so deeply I'm afraid to die."

"What is sin?" Shirina whispered.

"God knows. God only knows."

I brought her bird-soft body into my arms and kissed her, brushing my lips across the shining down of her cheek to her little crimson mouth. There was the faint, bitter taste of my tears in the kiss, and then I laughed softly.

I pulled the chain and locket from around my neck and dropped them on the floor, and we went out together, to the Cloud.

IV

WE WALKED through the halls of Astellar, like people in the heart of a many-colored jewel. Halls of amber and amethyst and cinnabar, of dragon-green and gray the color of morning mist, and colors and there are no names for in this dimension.

The others joined us, coming from the crystal cells where they spent their time. Shirina's people, velvety-eyed and gentle, with their crowns of fire-tipped antennae. They were like a living rainbow in the jewel-light of the halls.

Flack and myself and the three others —only five men, in all the time Astellar had been in our dimension, with the kind of minds Shirina's people wanted —wore our spaceman's black, walking in our golden auras.

I saw Flack looking at me, but I didn't meet his eyes.

We came, finally, to the place of the Cloud, in the center of Astellar. The plain ebon-colored doors stood open. Beyond them there was a mist like curdled sunshine, motes of pure, bright, gilded radiance, coiling and dancing in a cloud of living light.

Shirina took my hand. I knew she wanted to keep me from thinking about the place below, where still, through hypnotic command, the men and women and children from the Queen of Jupiter were walking under the X-crystals to their last long sleep.

I held her, tightly, and we stepped through into the Cloud.

The light closed us in. We walked on something that was not rock, nor anything tangible, but a vibration of force from the X-crystals that held us on a tingling, buoyant web. And the golden, living light clung to us, caressing, spilling over the skin in tiny rippling waves of fire.

I was hungry for it. My body stretched, lifting up. I walked on the vibrant web of power under my feet, my head up, the breath stopped in my throat, every separate atom of my flesh rejuvenated, throbbing and blazing—pulsing with life.

Life!

And then it hit me.

I didn't want it to. I thought I had it down, down for good where it couldn't bother me anymore. I thought I'd made my peace with whatever soul I'd had, or lost. I didn't want to think.

But I did. It struck me, suddenly. Like a meteor crashing a ship in space, like the first naked blaze of the sun when you clear the Darkside peaks of Mercury. Like death, the ultimate, final thing you can't dodge or get around.

I knew what that life was and where it came from, and how it had changed me.

It was Virgie. Virgie with her blasted red hair and her smoke-gray eyes, and Missy's life in her, and mine. Why did she have to be sent? Why did I have to meet her beside that dead Martian, on the Jekkara Low-Canal?

But I had met her. And suddenly I knew. I knew!

I don't remember what I did. I must have wrenched loose from Shirina's hand. I felt her startled thought touch my brain, and then it broke away and I was running through the Golden Cloud, toward the exit beyond. Running without control, running at top speed.

I think I tried to scream. I don't know. I was clean crazy. But I can remember even then that I sensed somebody running beside me, pacing me through the brilliant blindness of the Cloud.

I plunged out into the hall beyond. It was blue like still deep water, and empty. I ran. I didn't want to run. Some sane corner of my mind cried out to Shirina for help, but she couldn't get through the shrieking chaos of the rest of it. I ran.

And somebody ran behind me. I didn't turn around. I didn't care. I hardly knew it. But somebody ran behind me, on long fleet legs.

Down the blue hall, and into another one that was all flame-color shot with gray, and down that to a curving ramp cut from dark amber that dropped to the level below.

The level where the X-crystals were.

I rushed down the amber path, bounding like a stag with the hounds close behind, through a crystal silence that threw the sound of my breathing back at me, harsh and tearing. There was a circular place at the bottom of the ramp where four hallways met, a place jewel-carved in sombre, depthless purple.

I came into it, and from three of the hall mouths men stepped out to meet me. Men with young faces and snow-white hair, and naked bodies burning gold against the purple.

I stopped in the center of the floor. I heard bare feet racing on the ramp behind me, and I knew without looking who it was.

FLACK! He circled and fixed me with his cold strange eyes, like moonlight in his dark face. Somewhere he had found a blaster.

He held it on me. Not on my head or heart, but at my middle.

"I thought you might blow your top, Stevie," he said. "So we kind of stood by, in case you'd try something."

I stood still. I didn't have any feelings. I was beyond that. I was crazy —clean, stark crazy, thinking of time and the crystals pulsing just beyond my reach.

"Get out of my way," I warned him.

Flack smiled. There was no humor in it. The three men moved in a little behind him. They looked at Flack and they looked at me, and they didn't like any of it, but they were afraid.

Afraid to die, like all of us. Even Flack, who never had a soul.

Flack acted like someone being patient with a naughty child.

"Will you come back with us, Stevie, or do I blow your insides out, here and now?" he asked me.

I looked at his cold, queer eyes. "You'd like that."

"Yeah." He ran the red tip of his tongue over his swollen lips. "Yeah. But I'm letting you choose."

"All right," I said. "All right, I'll choose."

I was crazy. I jumped him.

I hit him first with my mind. Flack was strong, but I was fifty years older in the Cloud than he was, and Shirina had taught me things. I gathered all the force I had and let him have it, and he had to marshal his own thought-force to fight it off, so that for a second he couldn't manage the blaster with his conscious mind.

Instinctive reflex sent a crimson stream of deadly power smoking past me when I dived in low. It seared my skin, but that was all.

We fell, threshing, on the purple stone. Flack was strong. He was bigger than I, and heavier, and viciously mean. He beat most of the sense out of me, but I had caught his gun wrist and wouldn't let go. The three others took their golden auras back a little toward the hall mouths, afraid the blaster might let off and hit them.

They thought Flack could handle me, and they were afraid. So they drew back and used their minds on me, trying to hammer me down.

I don't know yet why they couldn't. I guess it was because of a lot of things, Shirina's teaching, my greater age, and the fact that I wasn't thinking consciously of anything. I was just a thing that had started some place and was going through.

Sometimes I wish they had broken me. Sometimes I wish Flack had burned me down on the purple stone.

I shook off their thought-blows. I took the pounding of Flack's big fist and the savaging of his feet and knees, and put all my strength into bending his arm. I yanked it away from me, and up and around where I wanted it.

I got it there. He made his last play. He broke his heart on it, and it didn't do him any good. I saw his eyes, stretched wide in his dark face. I can still see them.

I got my finger past his and pressed the firing stud.

I got up and walked across the floor, carrying the blaster. The three others spread out, warily, ringing me. Naked men glowing gold against the purple stone, their eyes hard, animal-bright with fear.

I blasted one through the head just as his muscles tensed for the leap. The others came in, fast. They knocked me down, and time was passing, the people walking slowly under the crystals with dreams in their eyes.

I kicked one man under the jaw and broke his neck, and the other tried to take the gun away. I had just come from the Cloud, and he hadn't. I was strong with life that pulsed up from the X-crystals. I forced his arms back and pressed the stud again, trying not to see his eyes.

And these were my friends. Men I drank and laughed with, and went with sometimes to worlds beyond the universe.

I went on, down a hall the color of a Martian dawn. I was empty. I didn't

feel or think. There was a pain a long way off, and blood in my mouth, but such things didn't matter.

I came to the place where the crystals were and stopped.

A LOT of them had walked under the crystals. Almost half of the five hundred families from the Queen of Jupiter. They lay still on the black floor, and there was plenty of room. They didn't crowd the others coming after them, a slow, quiet stream of human beings with dreams in their eyes.

The crystals hung in a wide circle, tilting slightly inward. They pulsed with a blackness that was beyond mere dark, a negative thing as blazing and tangible as sunlight. The angle of tilt and the tuning of the facets against one another made the difference in the result, whether projecting the Veil, or motive power or hypnosis, or serving as a gateway to another time and space.

Or sucked the power of life from human bodies.

I could see the faces of the dead. They were still smiling.

The controls were on the other side. I ran. I was dead inside, as dead as the corpses on the floor, but I ran. I remember thinking it was funny to run when you were dead. I kept on the outside of the crystals and ran with all my strength to the controls.

I saw Virgie. She was way back in the procession, and she was just as I knew she'd be, with Brad beside her and the green-eyed baby still in her arms, asleep.

Virgie, with her gleaming red hair and Missy's eyes!

I grabbed the controls and wrenched them over, and the shimmering vortex disappeared. I spun the great hexagonal wheel and notched it for full-power hypnosis, and ran out onto the floor, among the dead.

I told the living what to do. I didn't waken them. They turned and went back the way they came, back toward the Queen of Jupiter, running hard and still smiling, still not afraid.

I went back to the wheel and turned it again, to a notch marked in their danger-color, and then I followed the last of the humans into the hall. At the doorway I turned and raised my blaster.

I saw Shirina standing under the radiant blackness of the crystals, halfway around the curving wall.

I felt her mind touch mine, and then draw back, slowly, the way you take your hand away from someone you loved that has just died. I looked in her eyes. I had to.

Why did I do what I did? What did I care about red hair and smoke-gray eyes, and the three-hundred-year diluted blood of a girl named Missy? I wasn't human any longer. What did I care?

We were apart, Shirina and I. We had gone away from each other and we couldn't touch, even to say goodbye. I caught a faint echo of her thought.

"Oh, Steve, there were still so many things to do!"

Her great luminous black eyes shining with tears, her jewel-tipped antennae dulled and drooping. And yet I knew what she was going to do.

I couldn't see the crystals, suddenly. I couldn't see anything. I knew there was never going to be anything I wanted to see again. I raised the blaster and fired it full power into one of the hanging crystals, and then I ran.

I felt the bolt of Shirina's lethal thought strike my brain, and weaken, and shatter on something in her mind, at its source. I ran, a dead thing going on leaden feet, in a halo of golden light.

Behind me the X-crystals, upset by the blaster in their fullest sympathy of power, began to split and crack and tear the world of Astellar to bits.

I don't know much about what happened. I ran and ran, on the heels of the humans who still lived, but I was beyond thinking or feeling. I have vague memories of hallways lined with cells

of jewel-toned crystals, halls of amber and amethyst and cinnabar, of dragon-green and gray the color of morning mist, and colors there are no names for in this dimension.

Hallways that cracked and split behind me, falling in upon themselves, shards of broken rainbows. And above that the scream of power from the X-crystals, wrenching and tearing at Astellar.

Then something I heard with my mind, and not my ears. Shirina's people, dying in the wreckage. My mind was stunned, but not stunned enough. I could still hear. I could still hear.

The Queen of Jupiter was safe. The outward-moving v i b r a t i o n hadn't reached her yet. We got aboard her, and I opened the space doors and blasted her off myself, because the skipper and the first and second officers were asleep for good on Astellar.

I didn't watch the death of Astellar. Only after a long time I looked back, and it was gone, and there was only a cloud of bright dust shimmering in the raw sunlight.

I set the Iron Mike for Space Authority headquarters on Mars and turned on the automatic AC warning beam. Then I left the Queen of Jupiter in the Number 4 lifeboat, B deck.

That's where I am now, writing this, somewhere between Mars and the Belt. I didn't see Virgie before I went. I didn't see any of them, but especially Virgie. They'll be awake now. I hope their lives are worth what they cost.

Astellar is gone. The Veil is gone. You don't have to be afraid any more. I'm going to put this manuscript in a message rocket and send it on, so you'll know you don't have to fear. I don't know why I care.

I don't know why I'm writing this at all, unless—Bosh, I know! Why lie? At this stage of the game, why lie?

I'm alive now. I'm a young man. But the Cloud that kept me that way is gone, and presently I shall grow old, too old, very quickly, and die. And I'm afraid to die.

Somewhere in the Solar System there must be somebody willing to pray for me. They used to teach me, when I was a kid, that prayer helped. I want somebody to pray for my soul, because I can't do it for myself.

If I were glad of what I've done, if I had changed, perhaps then I could pray. But I've gone beyond humanity, and I can't turn back.

Maybe prayer doesn't matter. Maybe there's nothing beyond death but oblivion. I hope so! If I could only stop being, stop thinking, stop remembering.

I hope to all the gods of all the universes that death is the end. But I don't know, and I'm afraid.

Afraid. Judas—Judas—Judas! I betrayed two worlds, and there couldn't be a hell deeper than the one I live in now. And still I'm afraid.

Why? Why could I care what happens to me? I destroyed Astellar. I destroyed Shirina, whom I loved better than anything in Creation. I destroyed my friends, my comrades—and I have destroyed myself.

And you're not worth it. Not all the human cattle that breed in the Solar System were worth Astellar, and Shirina, and the things we did beyond space and time, together.

Why did I give Missy that locket?

Why did I have to meet Virgie, with her red hair?

Why did I remember? Why did I care? Why did I do what I did?

Why was I ever born?

●

If you hurry, you may still be able to get your copy of the gala 1952 edition of WONDER STORY ANNUAL—featuring DEATH OF IRON, by S. S. Held—25c at all stands!

It's a Dog's Life

By LARRY CLINTON

Meet Henry Miffen—the man with a wife and . . . a WOOF!

POSSIBLY the best way to describe Henry Miffen would be to list some of the outstanding attributes of his wife, Bertha: abusive, belligerent, caustic, domineering, extravagant and fitful —to name but a few. Consider, now, that Henry and Bertha had been continuously married for eleven years, and you will have a fairly good picture of the man, Henry Miffen.

Certainly, Henry had no reason to be excessively happy on that drizzly night in February, as he trudged home from his rather inadequate employment at *Hemmer & Hammer, Importers.* Beneath his raincoat, carefully shielded from the rain, was a manila packet bulging with papers and forms that had to be completed by morning—with no extra payment for the overtime involved. . . .

Henry thoughtfully removed his rubbers and folded the raincoat over his arm before opening the door to the apartment. Bertha greeted him from the living room.

"Henry! Don't take off your things —I want you to go to the store right away. Tom and Betty Woodson are coming over to visit us and I don't have a thing ready for night lunch."

"But, Bertha—" Henry made a slight gesture with the manila packet, "I have to work tonight—"

"W o r k—work—work!" B e r t h a stormed. "That's all I ever hear! Don't you ever think of me? Don't you think I am entitled to some fun after working my fingers to the bone all day?"

Bertha held up two adhesive-taped fingers that had been slightly cut in opening the can of hash they would have for dinner. Henry Miffen quailed at this visible evidence of servitude and shrugged back into the soggy raincoat.

"Henry! You're dripping water on the rug!" Bertha handed him a list of necessities and pushed him toward the door. "Hurry, before Henkleman's closes!"

The cold drizzle stung Henry's face as he left the apartment house foyer and a slow, ineffectual anger built up within him. At the corner, waiting for the traffic light to change, he was thoroughly spattered by a passing taxi and almost blinded by an unruly umbrella.

"It's a dog's life," Henry complained sadly. As if to prove the point he simulated a bark. *"Woof, woof."*

THE light changed and Henry scampered across the street, hopping to the sidewalk just in time to avoid being hit by a turning car. He yelped furiously at the driver and was quite surprised to find strange fingers scratching his ear.

"Well, little feller," a voice loomed out high above him, "you almost got it that time."

Henry felt a resounding whack across his rear and he instinctively leaped away—only to stop abruptly as he caught sight of a strange reflection in the store window. Henry scratched his head—the nondescript dog reflected in the window echoed the gesture. Henry's mouth sagged—the mirrored animal opened his mouth in exact unison. Henry stepped forward and the image moved to meet him!

"Well I'll be dog-goned!" thought Henry— "am I dreaming?" He applied the time-honored test, pinching himself.

The animal dissolved into thin air and the window innocently reflected Henry's mud-bespattered figure. Cold drops of displaced water ran down inside his collar and sent a chill through his frame. Shakily, Henry adjusted his raincoat and proceeded to Henkleman's. . . .

Arms laden with packages he returned to the apartment house and rang for the elevator—at rest, as usual, on the top floor. Henry's logical mind had been contemplating the phenomena that had occurred; a sudden possible solution came to him. He placed the packages on a chair and said clearly.

"It's a dog's life."

Nothing happened.

Henry barked softly, "*Woof, Woof.*"

The elevator door opened and the operator looked down at him. With an oath he kicked at Henry, his sharp toe connecting painfully with Henry's hip bone. Henry squealed.

"Get outa here, you mangy critter!" the elevator man growled. Henry managed to make it to the door before a second kick landed upon him—he scampered half-way around the block before he dared try the second part of his experiment. Henry pinched himself.

Soberly bemused, Henry rearranged his outer clothing and entered the foyer in his most dignified manner. The operator looked at him sourly as he picked up his packages.

"Were you in here just before, Mr. Miffen?"

"Ah—yes. Forgot to mail a letter," Henry improvised as he entered the elevator.

"You didn't let a mangy old dog in here, did you?" the man demanded.

"Of course not," Henry replied, rubbing his hip. He eyed the operator's back malevolently. . . .

Thanks to a television set that was almost half paid for, Henry managed to get some sleep during the Woodson's visit; an entire hour while the wrestling matches were on and almost that much during the roller derby that followed. At least partially refreshed when Tom and Betty left, he settled down to his paper work and Bertha went to bed.

MUCH later, in the wee hours of the morning, Henry stretched, yawned, and went to the bathroom to prepare for the few hours of sleep left to him. He viewed himself dispassionately in the full length mirror.

"A dog's life," he said softly, "*Woof, woof.*"

The tired looking mutt that peered back at him through the mirror was not much larger than a good-sized kitten. Henry pinched himself and pondered over the variation. Surely he had been larger than *that* before? . . was it something in the voice . . . the delivery? Henry tried again, louder and more assertive: "It's a dog's life! *Woof! Woof!*"

The animal that now stared boldly at him was much more worthy of attention. Strong limbed, alert of eye—a real champion in every line, Henry thought. He would have carried the experiment a step further if Bertha hadn't

chosen that moment to wake up.

"Henry!" she called. "What are you doing there? It's five o'clock—come to bed."

Fatigue settled over his poor human frame. Wearily, as if in a dream, Henry turned out the lights. . . .

Henry was fifteen minutes late in arriving at the offices of *Hemmer & Hammer* that morning—an unforgivable infraction that did not go unnoticed by the gimlet-eyed office manager, Mr. Simmons. Nor did Mr. Simmons—called *Persimmons* behind his back—fail to make Henry fully aware of his culpable status.

The method used by Simmons was devious but effective. Work piled up on Henry's desk, slowly but inexorably. For every form Henry completed, two more would arrive to increase the backlog. Henry stuck doggedly to the task, even skipping lunch in an effort to catch up. By mid-afternoon, however, it became evident even to Henry's weary brain that the ratio was working against him. Using what little reasoning power he had left at this point, Henry began a slow-down process, fully expecting to be invited to complete the work at home.

He was not far wrong; with quitting-time less than half an hour away, Mr. Simmons approached him—a sheaf of papers in his hand.

"Henry—" Simmons smiled coldly, "I'm sure you won't mind—ah—doing a little extra work tonight. I have some reports here that must be on Mr. Hemmer's desk in the morning."

Henry nodded, unprepared for what was yet to come.

"And, Henry," the smile grew colder, "these—ah—papers are highly confidential and are not to leave the office. I will notify the night watchman that you will be working on them here."

SIMMONS moved blithely away as Henry shook his head, questioning his own hearing. A slow, burning, impotent rage arose within him and he strode angrily to the men's room.

Henry was alone—free to vent his spleen upon the white tiled walls and the vacant cubicles. He stood well back from all obstructions and spoke clearly:

"It's a dog's life! *Woof! Woof! Woof!*"

Henry placed his paws on the edge of the wash-basin, craning his neck toward the mirror to view his latest metamorphosis. He was in this unusual position—admiring himself greatly—when the door opened and two men came in.

"Good Lord!" said Mr. Hemmer.

"What a beast!" Simmons quavered. He took a step to the rear and tried to withdraw behind the substantial body of his employer. Henry stared at them, unaware that his sagging jaw gave him a highly ferocious expression.

"Don't be a coward, Simmons!" Mr. Hemmer scolded. "Don't ever show fear before a dog."

To prove his point, Hemmer reached forth a timorous hand and scratched Henry's neck. Henry, about to pinch himself, suddenly realized the gravity of his situation. *What—*Henry reasoned *—would I do if I suddenly found myself scratching the neck of an employee in the men's room? Fire him, of course!*

Henry fawned, rubbing his nose against Hemmer's trousers—an act that greatly pleased his employer. "See?" Mr. Hemmer gloated.

"I think I'd better get the superintendent," said Simmons weakly, reaching for the door. For the first time, in his present form, Henry tried his voice.

It was a magnificent, full-bodied, awesome sound—calculated to strike fear into the hearts of all lesser animals. Simmons recoiled and shivered.

"Come, come, Simmons," said Hemmer testily. "Don't annoy the dog. Act intelligent, man!" Henry showed his appreciation by nuzzling his employer's trousers once again. Hemmer looked fondly down at him.

"Damned if I don't like the brute, Simmons! Those eyes remind me of

someone!" Hemmer's fingers played with Henry's scruff. "I might even decide to keep him—he probably would make a wonderful watch-dog."

"Him?" said Simmons scornfully.

Henry growled a retort and feinted a lunge at Simmons, fangs exposed and threatening—allowing himself to be pulled back by Hemmer. *Interesting*—Henry thought—*to watch the play of colors on Simmons face.* He growled once more and was quite pleased with the ashy-white reaction.

"I say, Simmons—" Hemmer mused, "I think we will lock him up in the stock room for the night. It'll give me a chance to decide about him. Had some complaints about rats in there anyway . . . we'll see how good a ratter this fellow is!"

Henry shivered. . . .

A FEW minutes later the door of the stock room closed upon him and Henry was alone—with a plate of dog food for company. He sniffed it avidly before remembering his breeding; with regrets, Henry pinched himself and the dream—or whatever it was—dissolved. Henry took stock of his present situation.

No matter how he looked at it he was in a sorry predicament. First, he had no reason to be in the stock room—as a human, that is—and could not consider arousing the night watchman to let him out. Second, and more important, was the work to be done—resting on his desk in the office. Third, there was a waiting Bertha. . . .

After much cogitation Henry decided that there was little he could do at this moment. Actually, what he wanted more than anything else was a place to lay his weary head—and the stock room had little to offer that looked comfortable. Expensive furs were locked up in the vault but he didn't . . . *Furs!* . . . *Thick Heavy Fur!* . . . a flashlight bulb went off in the back of Henry's tired brain. He concentrated deeply—*fur, thick fur, very thick fur* . . . and when he spoke his voice was round and soft—"Dog's life, *woof, woof.*"

Contentedly, Henry felt the soft baby fur that blanketed his round puppy body—he curled up and slept. . . .

Some time later he felt a premonition—dogs are keener than humans that way—and woke up tingling in every nerve. Quiveringly he looked up and *br-r-r-z-z-z-t* to his four feet, the puppy hairs on his back trying to bristle outward.

A sleek brown rat was *sneering* at him!

The rodent was almost twice his size. Henry tried to produce a menacing sound—a gasp, really—and the rat moved in, avid eyes measuring his round little body. Henry raised a futile paw, waving it in what he considered a combatitive gesture. The rat laughed nastily and prepared to spring. Barely in time, Henry remembered to pinch himself—hard.

The terrified rat scampered away.

Henry Miffen sat shivering on the small stock room counter, his feet drawn carefully up to the surface; all idea of sleep forgotten. Such was the impact of his nightmarish encounter that he did not hear the scuffle that took place in the hallway outside. Only when a key was applied to the stock room door did Henry realize that freedom might be at hand. He crouched on the counter and yelled with all the force he could c o m m a n d—"DOG'S LIFE—*WOOF! WOOF! WOOF!*"

The two thugs entering the stock room were prepared for almost anything but *this!* Having taken care of the night watchman and disconnected the burglar alarm, they had a reasonable right to expect that the worst part of their job was over. They were hardly expecting the awesome beast that leaped at them from the counter.

For here was a dog to end all dogs! In his desperation Henry had dreamed up a monstrous thing—a tremendous animal almost beyond human concept—wild-eyed, slavering, and omniverous.

The burglars quailed and raised their guns.

HENRY'S leap carried him past the two men, spilling them as the guns went off. He tore down the corridor, bounding over the trussed-up night watchman and taking the turns on two legs. The office door was open—Henry skidded in and kicked the door shut as he reached for the telephone. Henry barked twice to the startled operator before he remembered to pinch himself.

"Police!" he yelled: *"Send the police!"*

Actually, the phone call was unnecessary as the gunfire had been heard on the street below. A passing patrol car squealed to a stop and the gunmen were trapped before they could use the elevator. The call did serve, however, to bring out a collection of police reporters who looked skeptically from Henry to the two hoodlums, one holding a bleeding wrist.

On one side the policemen were questioning the frustrated thieves. Henry listened with one ear as the reporters tried to pump him. Thankfully, Henry realized that the gunmen were not going to mention the *dog.* (Possibly they just couldn't believe it.) Henry squared his shoulders and turned back to the press. Ignoring the growing soreness in his throat he addressed them.

"My name," he began, "is Henry Miffen. I . . ."

It was raining harder than ever when Henry finally left for home. He marched the four blocks to the subway station, head up and confident, considering how he would handle old Simmons on the morrow. His throat ached with the pent-up scorn that he would have to suppress until then—although the thought of it cheered him immensely. Henry left the subway and fought five more blocks of driving rain before he reached the shelter of his marital abode. He opened the door.

Bertha awaited him, arms akimbo and fire in her eyes. "Well!" she roared. "Well!"

Now is the time!—Henry thought to himself, leaning aggressively forward. He glowered at his wife as he prepared to put her forever more in her place—unaware that the momentous evening and the inclement weather had taken their toll by way of his larynx.

"IT'S A DOG'S LIFE—" Henry tried to shout. Great amounts of air passed impotently through his mute vocal cords; only a tiny sound resulted. Henry tried again, straining with every muscle:

"IT'S A DOG'S LIFE—WOO. . . ."

He stopped just in time, realizing what a ridiculous little figure *this* would create . . . hardly more than a spot on the rug. Henry shivered . . . his shoulders sagged.

"Well!" Bertha demanded. . . .

Read **THE GADGET HAD A GHOST**

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By MURRAY LEINSTER

Featured in the June Issue of Our Companion Magazine

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LUNAR PARASITES

By RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

Moon Explorer Dan Redland was convicted as a mass murderer when he punctured an air-dome, but . . . .

RED-HEADED Dan Radland bit his lip, nodded grimly. "All right, Chief," he said softly. "I'll say it was me that got all those men killed then. But here's just one last request—no, three.

"Number one—let me dig my own grave wherever I choose within a radius of half a mile of here. Under guard, of course. Secondly—carry out my execution as soon as possible. Third—use a full-strength welder-blast to bump me off with. Good enough?"

Hardbitten old Stan Suchard looked at the young culprit with a puzzled frown. He had always liked Danny Radland. Danny was reckless and gay—clever too. And deep—deep as the mystery of the Lunar deserts, with which they had all played company for so long. Nothing in the world could have pleased old Stan more than to see Danny proved innocent. But somehow it just wasn't in the books.

There was that punctured crystal dome, the first of what was going to compose a city here in ancient Copernicus, the largest crater on the Moon.

There, in the volcanic ash, was a long row of six-foot mounds—graves marked

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with crude metal crosses. They were the graves of men who had suffocated in the Lunar airlessness when Danny Radland had deliberately exploded that air-dome. With his own eyes old Stan had seen Radland murder those men by puncturing it.

The aged leader of the Lunar Rehabilitation Company wondered what lay behind Danny's odd request about doing his own grave-digging, and about being killed with the positively charged welder-blast instead of the usual intravenous anesthesia shot. Was his motive treachery or some queer romanticism?

Old Stan didn't ask because he didn't care to listen to any more fantastic lies. There wasn't much chance for treachery to be effective. He pitied Danny's tired, worried, ill look. But the youth was sane. His calm quiet tone proved that.

"Please yourself, Radland," Suchard said grimly. "I'll send you out to do your grubbing now. As soon as you've finished we can do the rest."

BEYOND the encampment of great airtight rocketships, near a high mass of volcanic rock on the crater floor, Danny Radland began digging his own grave with a pick and shovel. He was clad in an old-fashioned leaded space suit. Over him was a grimly armed guard of six men.

Radland wasn't nearly as cool or devil-may-care as he seemed outwardly. He alone knew part of the truth! He had shattered that airdome with explosive, all right! But he had done it for a reason!

He had *had* to kill those men—had to kill them because they were already doomed by something ghastly and tenuous, even as he was now, himself, discounting the sentence of death! To have them walking around was dangerous to the entire crew! Having them buried deep in the Lunar dust was far safer for their companions!

And now Radland meant to prove his point even at the cost of his life! He was as good as dead anyway even without the court-martial's swift sentence!

For there were strange aches in his body, fireballs bursting painfully in his brain, a chill in his blood. He had a fair idea of what was wrong with him though mere words to Stan Suchard and the others weren't enough. Those buzzards wouldn't believe anything so weird, and strange unless they were shown!

No, it wasn't disease germs that had attacked him and the men he had killed. Such bacteria could never have lived under the bombardment of ultra-violet rays from the Sun that came down to the Lunar surface, barren of any protecting atmosphere.

It was another form of life—electrical life, primitive, savage, senseless and inexorable. Being pure almost-invisible energy itself, its sole food was energy man or animal could supply as effectively as anything else.

Danny Radland had wandered far over the surface of the Moon during his time. He was probably the only living man who had ever seen this weird affliction, produced by a fantastic parasitism, follow its course from beginning to end.

It was his pal, Art Dantry, who had been the victim. A hundred hours after it hit him it had been all over. Art had been a withered corpse by then. And Danny Radland read a new significance in the ruins left in scattered places on the Moon.

Those old Selenites, who had carved grotesque images and bas-reliefs in their underground temples and habitations, perhaps had not become extinct merely because their world had grown old and unfit to support them. Maybe this alien life, that had somehow found its way through a leak in Art Dantry's leaded space-suit, had got them, too!

Such was the knowledge and suspicion that Danny Radland had carried around with him for half a year before he came back to the Moon again with Suchard's

outfit. And when he had seen a peculiar lavender glow around the leaky insulation of a generator beneath the dome his fears had grown a hundredfold. This was the Lunar parasitism in activity—it was lapping up its food. It absorbed heat, electrical power, anything to sustain its ghoulish vitality!

The men working beneath the dome had complained of illness. All had been wearing, in their sorties afield from the encampment, not the old-fashioned leaded armor but the newer aluminum suits, lined with an energized fabric that was supposed to be more effective than lead to screen dangerous cosmic rays.

But there was something wrong with that new armor just the same. Radland had killed those men with far more than regret in his heart. He had killed them because it was necessary. And then he had discovered that the affliction had bored into his own body too—maybe when he had been near the generator!

The grave he was digging for himself now was of peculiar form. In the hardened volcanic ash he made it like the inside of a jar—a narrow opening at the top and a wide bottom. He wanted to protect his executioners from what he thought was going to happen and so he was careful.

Radland hurried as best he could. He had had the affliction now for about twenty hours. He wondered if any more of his fellows had been infected. He couldn't be sure but maybe he could show them what it was all about.

For one thing he had tested himself with a pith ball charged with positive electricity. It had been strongly attracted to his fingers. That was what had given him an idea. So now, when his grave was finished, Radland sent one of his sullen guards to fetch Stan Suchard and Clive Harmon, who was going to act as executioner.

Danny Radland didn't climb out of the pit. He merely handed a letter he had written up to old Stan.

"Read this after my execution, Chief," he explained quietly through his communicator phones. "Especially if anything goes wrong or looks funny. Harmon can blast me while I stand down here."

THAT was all anybody said. Radland saw a circle of faces looking down upon him. Faces that showed contempt, hate and pity for a wholesale murderer. He wondered suddenly with a dull hope if his martyrdom would do any good. Almost with curiosity he watched Harmon point the barrel-like muzzle of the blast-welder down toward his head. When the trigger was depressed Danny Radland lost all sense of being.

But to those who watched things were very strange. The weapon gave a sharp hiss as usual. Then there was a powerful puff of energy from the pitlike grave. Electrical discharges lanced through it. Their muscles tingling, the men stepped back. When things had quieted again they looked down once more into the grave.

Miraculously Danny Radland's body and equipment weren't reduced to ash and fused metal as they should have been. He just lay crumpled at the bottom of the pit, not a visible mark on him. As far as appearances went he might not even be dead—he might be only unconscious! And yet the most fearful force of destruction known to man had been directed against him!

While two of his aides proceeded to lift the body out of the pit Suchard tore open the envelope that contained Danny's brief message. Men crowded to look over the old scientist's shoulder as he read:

Well, what happened, Chief? The disease or whatever name you want to give the thing that clamped itself on me and those boys in the dome bears a terrific negative charge, as near as I can figure. Electrical in at least one of its aspects. I tested myself with a pith ball on a string, positively charged. The pith ball

was violently attracted toward my fingertips, showing that I was negatively charged. Because the blast welder is strongly positive electrically you should see neutralizing effects of some sort.

Yep, it's alive, Chief. Dangerous as hell. Maybe you'll understand now. Better use the blast on those bodies too. Safer for everybody. And throw away those new aluminum space-suits. They're no good at screening off this thing at all. But lead does the trick, somehow . . .

Old Stan Suchard's heavy brows quivered as, fearful and awed, he began to catch on.

"The negative electrical energy of—of this life! It must have neutralized the positive energy of the blast welder!" he stammered. "That's why Danny wasn't destroyed by the blast!"

In another couple of minutes men were digging up that row of graves, a hundred yards distant. Each body, interned for twenty hours, was removed, still in its space-suit, which served in lieu of a coffin. Blasts were applied to each with the same result as in the case of Danny Radland himself. Electrical crackles, betraying the death of something unseen—yet the bodies themselves remained entirely undamaged!

Meanwhile, Danny Radland came to. His muscles and nerves were plenty sore as though something deadly had been scorched out of them. But the sullen dizzy ache of that ghastly Lunar parasite was gone — neutralized by positive electricity and smothered by an overdose of the energy that was its food.

Old Stan was running toward Radland from the direction of the graves. "They're coming to life, Danny!" he was yelling excitedly. "All those men who died in that dome when you let the air out!"

Young Radland raised himself weakly to his knees. It was his turn to be startled now. But after he had thought a moment he realized that it was all logical.

"So, Chief?" he said to the flabbergasted old man. "Well—this thing must be something like catalepsy. Those fellows were just smothered—not damaged in any way. Their spacesuits protected them from Lunar conditions. And the parasitism was electrical.

"It must have kept a little spark going in those men, making it not death but suspended animation. It must have kept away all tissue decay too—even the slightest. After all our own lives are partly electrical too—in a small way. Anyhow I'm glad, Chief, that things turned out for the best!"

Stan Suchard helped his young companion to his feet. It was an apology. They both looked at the sullen wall of Copernicus around them, brooding in the sunshine. They both knew the Moon better now—her ancient cryptic history. her dangers, her future, which they were trying to build. Rich mines and a city.

But they were gladdest of all, this reckless youth and this grim old scientist, because they understood and appreciated each other far better now.

Man Battles Mutant on DRAGON'S ISLAND in the Novel of That Name by Jack Williamson—Featured in the June Issue of Our Companion Magazine

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The women of Earth welcome the men of Mars!

Something Borrowed

by DANIEL KEYES

THE two lovely young women leaned in close over their cups of coffee, ignoring the check that had popped up in the robo-server.

"How's yours?" asked Mabel.

"He says he's tall and handsome. Light green hair and soft golden skin. He says he's strong too."

"Mine says they're all different—not too—but just enough to make it interesting. He says his skin is a soft violet, and his eyes are like crystals." Mabel leaned back and started putting on lipstick.

"I can't wait."

"Neither can I."

Mabel Evans pushed the button on the arm of her chair, and it straightened out gently, leaving her in a standing position. She studied herself carefully in the wall mirror to the right of the table and said, "I don't think I'll be able to hide it from Charlie much longer. I'm glad the invasion is tomorrow." She looked at the bleached blonde. "It is tomorrow Helen, isn't it?"

Helen stopped filing her nails, and looked up, lips pursed. "That's what Zgarra told me. He said they'd invade three days after we got the teleports set up, and Louise reported at the meeting the other night that all of them were ready and in working order."

Mabel stretched her arms and yawned. "Oh, I wish they were here. A man. A strong, handsome young man all my own."

Helen smiled knowingly. "It's a shame you had to go through all that trouble to get Charlie."

"Hah! Charlie! I courted him for two years before he agreed to marry me. He's one of those that likes to play hard-to-get, and he finally married me only to avoid having to pay my salary. Well I hope he gets what he deserves when we have the *occupation.*"

Helen looked at her wristichron. "Golly I'm late. I'd better get back to the office or George'll scream blue-murder."

"Will there be a meeting tonight?" asked Mabel.

"No," said Helen, fumbling in her wallet. "It'll be tomorrow night, and we'll welcome the first troops. Here's ten credits. Sign for me will you?"

"Oh, stop worrying about George so much. What difference does it make anyway?"

Helen stopped and glared at her. "You know what difference it makes. You know what the *orders* are. Maybe you don't care what Pfhlegg says, but I don't want to get Zgarra angry at me even before I've met him."

Mabel scratched her cheek with a long red fingernail. "You're right," she mused. "You're very right. I wonder how far away Mars *is.*"

"Does that matter?" said Helen. "Look, I've got to be going. Do you want to go shopping tonight?"

"I was just wondering. *Mabel Pfhlegg* —sounds nice, doesn't it?" I wonder if we'll live here after the invasion, or if they'll take us back with them to Mars . . ."

IF CHARLIE wondered why Mabel didn't make any passes at him during a whole afternoon at the office, he said nothing about it. Mabel knew that his smugness and complacency was reflected in every other twenty-first century male—what there was left of them—the old bats.

It had taken a chain-reaction of wars and atomics to do it, but they'd finally succeeded in killing off the cream of the eligible male crop. Most of those that survived were either sterile or so affected to alter the birth ratio to one male birth for every five hundred females. Oh, there were a few young men around, but these were rare and at that nothing to speak of.

Mabel smiled to herself when she thought of how proud she'd been to hook Charlie. It was an honor to have a male all your own, to be married. Very few women could boast of that distinction. Of course there were those extremely gorgeous and fantastically wealthy actresses who managed to hook a young one, but you didn't count them because you couldn't compete on that level.

She'd considered herself fortunate—exceptionally fortunate—to get Charlie. There wasn't much to him, and as most marriages went these days, it was in name only. Then—on that night two weeks ago—Pfhlegg had visited her telepathically in her sleep. Dear old Charlie. Stupid, senile, ugly egotistical Charlie. Well, there would soon be no more of that. Women all over the earth knew that the Martians—with their help—were going to invade Earth. The Martians were men.

"Mabel dear," said Charlie, in that crotchety voice of his. "Will you take a recording to Pemberton Sons for me?"

"Yes Charles," she answered sweetly, "I'll get my stenophone." She brought in the small microphone attachment, pressed the button and sat down on Charlie's lap. "Go ahead Charles."

"Gentlemen: We have received your record pertaining to the February shipment of—"

Mabel wondered if the Martians had marriage ceremonies anything like those on Earth. Maybe they didn't have marriages or ceremonies at all. They might have free-love or polygamy or something. Mabel frowned. Well, the women of Earth had strong feelings about things like that—they'd insist on some sort of ceremony. Pfhlegg wouldn't mind—he had such a nice voice. She hoped he'd stay on Earth with the occupation troops. Not that it really mattered, but she was used to New York. It didn't really matter.

"Very proudly yours, Charles W. Hobson; Vice-President," ugly old Charlie finished.

Mabel managed to finish the rest of the day without making Charles suspicious, and hurried downtown to meet Helen in front of Universal Macy's. She had her heart set on a gorgeous violet sheath—to match Pfhlegg's skin.

She got off the surface local-ramp at twenty-third and "A" and decided to walk the square to "B" rather than wait for a crosstown. A robot stepped out of the way to let her pass.

"Mabel! OH, MABEL-L!" It was Helen, and she had Louise with her.

"Just coming to meet you Helen. Hi Louise!"

"C'mon," whispered Helen anxiously. "There's a special meeting."

"But you said—"

"Never mind what I said. This is a special emergency meeting. The troops won't be able to get through. The invasion's been sabotaged."

"What—?"

"Somebody snitched," said Louise gravely. Her eyes were green slits. "The men have turned on the force-screens, nullifying the teleports."

Mabel turned white, and her lower lip trembled. "What'll we do?"

"There's plenty of work to be done," snapped Louise. "Let's get to the meeting."

As Mabel looked up, she saw that the sky was quickly becoming a dirty brownish-blue, indicating that the force-screens had indeed been turned on. She became angry, and her voice cracked as she spoke.

"I'll bet it was one of those dirty little actresses who's got herself a young one, and doesn't give a damn about the rest of us."

"Let's take a shell," said Louise. "It'll get us there faster."

THE three women entered an empty yellow-blue striped shell at the stand beside the surface-ramp on twenty-third. Louise pressed the button, shutting the lock, and then wrote the address with the metal stylus on the metal operator-plate. Beside it she wrote her registration number—90263 L-R—and her characters were round and firm. She smiled.

"When the invasion comes, the bill for this will never get paid."

"If—" said Mabel, miserably.

Louise turned on her. "I said *when!* You don't think we're going to let something like this stop us now, do you? We'll fight to the last. Men like these are worth fighting for."

They got out in front of a small suburban home. The hedges were trimmed as most smart couples trimmed their hedges these days—in picturesque non-objective. Mabel gnawed at her lower lip.

"Barbara Kingsley—she's got a husband."

Louise snorted. "Yes, and he's older than your Charlie—seventy-two."

"Oh."

They walked inside. Mabel looked at Louise curiously. "How's *your* Martian?"

Louise eyed Mabel suspiciously for a moment, and then said, "He says he's wonderful—" whispering the words reverently —"and he's got very light pink skin, and blue eyes. He's the leader."

Mabel forced a pleasant smile.

"That's nice. No wonder you're so determined."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing—nothing. I mean it must make you feel quite proud to have been chosen by their leader. He must make *your* dreams quite pleasant. It's a wonder you have anything to do with the rest of us—socially."

"Why Mabel!" gasped Helen, "that's not fair. You know it was just a matter of chance, who was contacted telepathically. Now let's have no dissension among ourselves, or we'll all suffer for it."

Several women had already arrived before them, and even this quickly the discussion had reached an hysterical pitch. Servo-robots wheeled in and out with *hors d'ouvres,* and cocktails, and the air was thick with smoke and high-strung voices. The card tables and *Mah Jongg* racks were set up to one side (in the event of a raid), but were ignored. A petite redhead wearing a sea-green sheath was asking:

"But I don't see why we can't have the invasion. I just don't understand."

"It's the force-screens," offered a plump woman, wearing a black sheath obviously two sizes too small. "They keep the energy waves that are weakened from cosmic bombardment, from coming through to the teleports."

There were tears running down the little redhead's face. "Then—then there won't be any invasion. And—and I won't be able to marry Xigurrg." She was blubbering now, and two of the older women were sniffling and trying to comfort her.

Louise, who had been listening quietly, bounded to the center of the room. Her eyes were menacing, and her hair, which had fallen from its upsweep, fell in wild curls down her back.

"There *will* be an invasion. If the women of Earth have to kill every man, and tear down the force-screen installations with their bare hands, there'll be an invasion. And we'll have our men from Mars."

The applause was spontaneous.

"For centuries the women of Earth have taken on the passive roles, not because we were weak, but because we wanted to salve man's ego. Each of us tried to outdo the other in bowing and scraping and making herself desirable for those men that were left in the world after the Wars—*men,*" she spat the word contemptuously. "These are not men, these old and sterile creatures, and they are not strong and powerful as we have allowed them to believe. *We* are the powerful ones. *We* have the strength and determination, and *I* say that now is the time to assert ourselves and tear down these puppets and their force-screens, before this God-sent opportunity for the fulfillment of the destiny of womanhood is gone from us forever. . . ."

HER voice reached out in its hysteria, and hypnotized the women around her. Eyes were glazed, and lips were moist, and suddenly a hungry shriek went up from fifteen throats.

"She's right—"

"We're not the weak ones!"

"Down with the men of Earth! Up with the men of Mars!"

"Up with the men of Mars! Mars!"

They planned and plotted. Groups of women in the small close-knit communities all over the world were to be advised of the insurrection. The date was set. On the twenty-sixth of April 2152, the women of the world would take control of the Earth's government and industries. Woman's destiny would be fulfilled.

After the meeting, Louise, Helen and Mabel left together.

"You were wonderful Louise," said Mabel.

"It was an inspired speech," added Helen.

Louise held her head high, and her shoulders back. "Goodnight girls, and remember what's to be done!"

"Goodnight."

That night Mabel Evans lay awake

in the dark for a long time. The cool night air seeped in through the half-open window, and bathed her with its fragrance. The blinds were tilted down and the moon and stars cast their enchanted half-light across the bed. That was Mars out there—the unblinking orange pinpoint that stood out against the diadem of stars.

On that planet there was a man—or something close to a man—waiting to take her in his arms. Waiting to call her his own. He had spoken to her telepathically several times in the past two weeks—telling her about himself and the other men on his planet—telling her what part she had to play in the invasion.

It had been her job to canvass the neighborhood and discover those women who had no feeler-attachments for their tele-video sets. Other collaborationists saw to it that these were supplied, and still others—more mechanically minded—handled the business of converting the sets, under Martian instruction, into teleports through which the Martian troops could come. Pfhlegg had explained it to her. He said it was just a matter of converting themselves to energy waves in their own teleports, traveling through space in that form, and being reconverted into matter in the teleport at the other end. It was just like video—he had said—except that matter was transformed instead of light, and that was why there had to be teleports at both ends for interplanetary travel to take place. She didn't understand it too well, and she didn't know why spaceships couldn't be used, but she guessed that Pfhlegg would know best.

Mabel was restless and turned and tossed on her pillow. Time moved so slowly, and surely Charlie must sense her decrease of attention towards him. Poor Charlie. Not that any of this was his fault, but it was just the mechanics of the thing. She didn't like to think of his being hurt—she'd grown a bit used to him, in a way.

She turned over and went to sleep, determined that she would get Pfhlegg to promise that no harm would come to Charlie. But Louise was definitely right. The women of the world had to unite.

CHARLIE was having his breakfast when Mabel went downstairs the next morning. He was in the middle of his grapefruit when she sat down across the table from him.

"Good morning, Charles."

He peered at her over his bifocals. "Good morning dear." He waited while she gave the robo-server her order, and then he handed her the *Morning Telegraph*. "Have you seen the headlines yet, my dear?"

The words screamed at her in bold type:

INVASION-FROM-MARS SCARE PROMPTS GOVERNMENT TO THROW UP FORCE SCREENS FOR EARTH SECURITY

Charlie dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. "That crazy Henderson columnist seems to think that it's all some plot between the women of Earth and the Martians. Ever hear of anything so crazy?"

Mabel forced a laugh. "Those columnists will do anything to shock the public." She took a mouthful of greens and looked down at her plate to avoid Charlie's watery-blue eyes.

Charlie cackled. "Well, I say, it doesn't hurt to keep the force screens up. We *are* rather weak, and we *do* have to protect our womenfolk. After all, there might be a kernel of truth in the invasion scare—not with the women involved, I mean—but scientists have always figured there might be an intelligent race on the planet."

Mabel opened an egg.

"Where are the force-screens operated from?" she asked. "Here in the city, or from New Washington?"

Charlie shot her a sharp look. "Why?"

"Oh, just female curiosity. You know how we women are."

"Heh-heh. Yes, I know how you are. Well, there are five major control centers and several minor ones. Let's see . . . when I served my hitch in the government back in '10—that was forty-two years ago—they had three. New York, Detroit and San Francisco. Got lots more now."

He pressed his chair-button, and was slowly lifted and deposited in a standing position. The robo-server came forward with the stylus and metal-plate, and Charlie wrote his registration number. He said to Mabel:

"The food and service bill is due today. Be sure to take care of it before you come to the office, will you, dear?"

Mabel nodded and Charlie left. She looked at the standing chair for a while, and now it distastefully symbolized the weakness and laziness of the men who had developed them because they needed them. Up 'till now she had accepted these things without question. She drummed with her fingers on the smooth chrom-alloy table. She had much work to do today. . . .

Two months later the revolt took place. In a bloodless *coup* the women of Earth—armed with atomic hand-weapons, and in control of the robot work-crews—declared themselves the *de facto* rulers of the world, and imposed universal marshal-law. The men were placed in special camps under loyal robot-guards. They had voted that the men should be allowed to live out their natural lives, cared for by robots only, and should under no circumstances be harmed.

Mabel personally escorted Charlie to his camp, and right up to the end he was unable to accept the fact.

"Now, Mabel dear," he said, in that thick old voice of his, "what's this business all about? Why can't I go home with you?"

Two months ago Mabel would have broken down and cried at this display of simple faith and naivete. Now she merely poked her atomgun in his back, and said:

"You'd better get along Charles, and just forget about going home. And you'd better understand that the women have taken over. Men have done enough damage to the world with their stupid, egotistical behavior. Now, we women rule—on our own terms."

"Yes, dear. Of course I understand. But why can't we go home?"

WITH everything under control, and the Matriarchy firmly entrenched and in full power, a ceremony was held for the official cancellation of the force-screens. Louise—the New World Leader—presided. She wore her skin-pink sheath rather short, and around her waist was a belt of woven-gold which held an atomgun.

"Women of the World," she began, and her voice was even and strong with none of the hysteria that had characterized her that night at the meeting. "Today we find in us a new strength—the power to determine our own destiny. No longer is it necessary for us to bow and scrape before men, because of their scarcity. There are other men in the solar-system," she pointed to the heavens, "and these men want the earth—and us!"

Cheers.

"And now I will throw the switch that shuts off the force screens. We will not be kept from our birthright and our destiny!"

She threw the switch and all eyes turned upward; as the skies turned from muddy-brown to a soft natural blue there were squeals of pleasure, and o-ohs and a-ahs, and exclamations of assent. After the singing of the New World Anthem, the meeting broke up. Mabel left with Helen.

"I guess it'll be soon now," said Mabel.

"Uh-huh," nodded Helen.

"When do you think they'll come?"

"Dunno. Maybe tomorrow."

Mabel stroked the back of her hair,

which was now cut short in a boyish-bob. "Maybe," she whispered hopefully, "maybe they'll come tonight, now that the force-screen's been cut off. Do you think they might come tonight?"

Helen stopped. "I hadn't thought of that. I think I'll get myself a new night-sheath—just in case." She started to walk off rapidly.

"Wait for me. I'll go with you."

There was a long line of women outside of Universal Macy's department store. They waited over half-an-hour, and finally Helen got the golden night-sheath to match Zgarra's skin, and Mabel got a violet two-tone scented, for Pfhlegg.

"I hope they can come tonight," sighed Mabel.

It was lonely in the house without Charlie there. Small noises seemed louder, and everywhere was the emptiness and the strangeness of a home without a man. Mabel felt a choking in her throat, but she fought it back. It wouldn't be long. Soon the invasion would take place, and the men from Mars would arrive.

She bathed in a tub of scented bubbles, and as she looked at the mirrored wall she regretted—for a moment—having cut her hair. Did Martians have any preferences regarding women's hair? Did they like it long? Or short? Anyway, hers looked good either way, and some of the other women couldn't say as much for theirs.

She spent an hour brushing and fluffing her hair before she went to bed.

MABEL had been asleep only a little while, but it wasn't a noise that woke her. It was more like a feeling—an intuition. She opened her eyes slowly, stretching her arms sleepily as she did, and the billowy sleeves of her night-sheath made her look like a violet bird with outspread wings.

She gasped when she saw him.

Before her stood the most handsome man she had ever seen. He stood tall, muscular and regal, and his violet skin glowed with a soft luminescence that was soothing to her. His crystal eyes flashed shards of multi-colored hues. He was a king of kings, to her, and a god among men. Her breath came tremulously, and she spoke softly, as if she feared to frighten him away.

"Welcome to Earth—Pfhlegg."

She didn't see his lips move, but his thoughts came to her. "What occurred to cause such a delay? Why were we unable to contact you for so long?"

Mabel explained to him, going quickly over the events of the past two months, and when she finished he just stood there with a dazed expression on his face.

"Do you mean," he asked incredulously, "that you women have captured the men of the planet, and now possess all atomic weapons and other means of warfare?"

"Yes."

"But all our pre-contact observations for the past five-hundred years indicated that the women of this planet were weak, soft, emotional creatures—given to intuitive, irrational behavior. It was always the power of the Earth-*men* we feared."

Mabel drew herself up proudly. "That was the way it appeared—but our men were egotistical and self-centered, so we let them go on thinking that they were the stronger sex long after it had ceased to be true. But when they threatened to come between us and our future husbands—"

"Husbands—?"

"—with those stupid force-screens of theirs, then we decided that it had gone far enough, that it was time to show them who really controlled things around here. I nearly *killed* Charlie."

Pfhlegg placed his right palm on his brow.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I'm sending a telepathic report," he said.

"Oh."

"Goodbye—"

"Goodbye?"

"Yes, we've decided to call off the invasion."

Mabel blinked. "But—but you can't!"

Pfhlegg walked to the teleport set, and Mabel watched dumbfounded.

She grabbed his arm and spun him around. "But you can't call off the invasion, after all we've done for you."

He cringed involuntarily at the sharpness of her voice, and his hands came up to his face as if to protect himself. She could see him trembling all over. He straightened self-consciously.

"We had no idea that you Earthwomen were so powerful."

Mabel was stunned. "You're afraid of us," she accused.

"Of—of course not," he snapped. "It—it's just that," he groped for a moment, "our *women*—they're violently against the invasion. They—they're very jealous; furiously jealous."

Mabel recoiled as if from a blow. "Your *women*—?"

"Y-yes. They were against the whole idea of contacting Earthwomen, from the very beginning. And now—with the men gone—what would they think?"

"Why you lowdown, two-timing—" She grabbed for a hair-brush to throw.

"Please—please," he begged. "I'm just a soldier. I just follow orders. *Ow-w-w.*"

The brush hit him in the shoulder.

Even as it left her hand, Mabel was sorry.

"I—I didn't mean to do that—"

Before she could stop him, he plunged into the teleport. He was gone, and the room was blanketed in naked silence. Mabel threw herself on the bed, and burst into tears. Of all things—*Martian Women!*

HOW long she had been crying, she couldn't tell, but a buzz from the tele-video set's special broadcast signal brought her back to reality. She wiped her eyes and went over to turn it on.

It was Louise broadcasting. Her voice came out hoarse, and Mabel could see that her eyes were all red from crying. There was a desperate look about her.

"Women of the world. All over the Earth tonight, millions of us have been weeping. Our plans, our hopes, and our dreams have been shattered. We have been wronged. We have been spurned because of the very strength which we had to reveal to make it possible for Mars to invade Earth. These men we waited for so long—fled in the face of our surrender, back to their *women*. . . ."

Mabel sat on the rug, close to the video set, her knees hunched up under her, listening carefully to every word that Louise said. A suspicion of what was to come dawned on her, and she breathed in sharply as she saw Louise take up the woven-gold belt that held the atomgun and strap it on.

"—Legends of the Ancients show us what we must do." she cried. "When the male founders of Ancient Rome found that they needed women for their city, they invaded the Sabines and stole the Sabine's women for themselves. It was done in legend by men; now it can be done—for history to record—by women!

"To those who are with me, I say, 'buckle on your gunbelts and join me, and together we can take the men of Mars for ourselves. The Martian women have had them long enough.'"

Mabel was already changing her clothes. She put on a violet day-sheath, and took her atomgun belt from the dresser drawer. As she strapped it on, the words came powerfully from the loudspeaker:

"To those of you who are not afraid to fight and die for our cause: Go to your teleports. When I give the signal, throw the switch and enter—"

Mabel waited. She could visualize the millions of women all over Earth, waiting, poised—on the threshold of a great endeavor. She trembled with expectancy.

Louise's voice came out loud and clear. "Onward women of Earth. To the invasion of Mars. . . ."

COSMIC ENCORES

(Continued from page 6)

ing warm cycles and civil wars during cold periods. We are ending a warm cycle now which saw the two World Wars. Around 1980 the 100-year cycle coincides with a 170-year cycle to bring us an intense cold-dry period which may mark a major crisis in modern history.

The New Golden Age

They have noticed also that mankind's most productive and talented periods coincide with the upturn to a warmer cycle. As the 100 and 170-year cycles start to turn upward again around the year 2000, they will be further reinforced by the 510-year cycle which swings in as the 20th century ends. The approximate year 2000, therefore, should mark the beginning of a new Golden Age for mankind.

Predictions based on scientific probabilities can never achieve pin-point accuracy since they mark only trends, not hard and fast conditions. But trend-spotting is a fascinating occupation in itself. Even 400 years ago, Shakespeare noticed, "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at its crest. . . ."

Most of our fiction, like SLAN, leaps far into the future to examine some of the probabilities, both happy and grim, of the coming Golden Age. All thoughtful people seem convinced it is on its way. But when, and how, and what it will look like—ah, there's the nub for many a story.

LETTERS FROM READERS

UP TO NOW the letter column of FSM has been a distinctly minor activity, but it seems as if the days of ease are over. The letters are coming in.

FORTEAN FORTITUDE
by Don Martin

Dear Sir: I am not happy about your editorial in the winter number of Fantastic Story, entitled, Charles Fort: *The Disciple of Disbelief*. I think you would have been much nearer the truth had you written 'The Apostle of Doubt.' The most exact thing you could have said would have been 'The Apostle of the Open Mind.'

Fort's books are old friends of mine. I have read them from cover to cover at least three times. When I am bored or restless, I read them at random for the sheer delight that comes from his perfect mastery of the English language.

Analogy, allegory, metaphor: Fort is the master of them all. No one since Homer has equaled him. No one in history has given our language the same degree of trenchant punch that he has.

I am not happy about Mr. Tiffany Thayer and his Fortean Society either. Mr. Thayer knew Fort personally So it may be presumptuous for me to criticize. Still, it seems to me he has missed the target Fort was shooting at. Fort needed a Plato to interpret him. Instead he got an Apostle Paul. Thayer is trying to make a dogma of Fort's books, the last thing on earth he would have wanted. I have lately been disgusted with Thayer on two counts. He said that he and Fort were Atheists. It is impossible for me to see how anyone can be a Fortean and be an atheist. He supported draft dodging. I know of nothing in Fort's writings remotely suggesting that any one should evade his share of the common burden.

Fort should not be understood as a scientist. He may have been one when he was younger, but his books are pure philosophy. No one can read them without being influenced by them. It may take three or four years but it will come. No one can read his books without being changed. Fort laughed at everyone, the scientists, the priests, his readers, himself, but he was deadly serious always.

Fort's message, as I got it was: We live in a changing cosmos, our senses are faulty, our mind is inadequate, we cannot grasp the whole picture. Let us therefore keep our minds open and be reasoning beings, examining every thought and suggestion that comes to us, resisting all fixed opinions and all prophets in politics and science as well as in religion.

Perhaps I have read something in Fort that is not there. I do not think so. I think Fort deliberately, and with consumate skill, set out to make his readers, within their capacities, clear-headed, open-minded reasoners.

It may be a long time before Fort is fully appreciated but some day, perhaps it will not be called 'Forteanism', intelligent people will realize that they cannot ever know all the answers and they will then be Forteans whether they know it or not.—*P. O. Box 207, Salmon, Ida.*

P.S. He may never have heard of Fort or read his books but the works of Hendrik Willem Van Loon are shot through and through with pure Forteanism.

P.P.S. So were those of Erasmus.

P.P.P.S. Not to mention Montaigne.

There doesn't seem to be much area of disagreement between us after all. I'll even grant your opening premise that the word "doubt" might have been more exact than the word "disbelief," but submit that this is conditioned by your own personal reaction to Fort. I think it is a mistake to say you are a "Fortean" because you are making a theology of it, and after all, what is a Fortean? A man who doubts? Fort

had no monopoly on the inquiring mind and as your own postscripts point out, he was imitated heavily by men who lived hundreds of years before him.

My own enthusiasm about Fort is tempered by the fact that all his writings expressed so negative a philosophy. It has its uses, no doubt, but must be supplemented by something positive, not left by itself. However, yours is a perfectly valid viewpoint and we enjoyed your letter. Come again.

NOW IT'S CALIFENS
by Edward G. von Seibel

Dear Sham: I always did suspect you were editor of FSM, you sneaky old cuss, but up till now I've received no inkling beyond suspicion until my eyes fastened on your name riding the masthead. Now I *know* it's you that props his feet on the editorial desk. However, don't misunderstand me—I'm not objecting to your moth-eaten old buffalo hide occupying the editorial hotseat. (Speaking of buffalo hides, I wonder if Merwin ever tried to tame a buffalo like I suggested he do to prove it would be possible, as he showed in his story a while back. If he did, tell me where his grave is so I can put lilies on it.)

Anent this sudden disappearance of litters—I mean, letters, I must voice a protest of one hundred decibels; namely, vociferously. How in hell is our club, name of CALIFENS, going to find more members if you eliminate your letter column? Take this Romanoff fellow (You got to *throw* him?); he may be an intelligent fellow, one we would like as a member of our club, but we have neither his address nor his letter, which we use as a method of selection: If the letter writer writes intelligently, and lives in California, and we have his address, he is eligible for membership. You can't do this to us!

The issue I am writing about (Winter, 1951) has a story in it my dear mother is even now engrossed in reading—every time I want to use it for reference I dash into the living room, kneel down and begin thumbing rapidly for the subject I want—and presently encounter a hand in my hair pulling me away from the magazine. You're absolutely right, absolutely right when you say the older stories make good beginning points for the beginner—mom wouldn't touch any of the new stories because most of them she couldn't understand, but after she started on these old ones, she found a beginning point, just like you said, you, you. . . .

All kidding aside Sam, congratulations on a good issue of FSM.—*Box 445, Olivehurst, California.*

Who's eliminating the letter column? On the contrary it is growing by leaps and hounds—I mean bounds. No, Merwin is not taming any buffaloes outside of those you can find on a nickel. He's more the intellectual type than outdoor.

Am so flabbergasted I can hardly say thanks for the compliment. Is old age softening you up? Or are you gradually acquiring such good taste that you are at last able to appreciate the sterling literature we are knocking ourselves out to get for you? My best to your mother.

LOGIC TRIUMPHANT
by Allan Kaufman

Dear Ed: Re Winter 52 issue; first your editorial is the best ever. That's what we need, a little good sense via the printed page occasionally. Otherwise your stories are, generally speaking, all right. Some are not too good, others make up for it by being extra good, so as far as I'm concerned, just keep on the way you are.—*9 W. Harrison Street, Chicago, Ill.*

A convert to the "less work more play" theory propounded in this column in the winter issue. Thanks for the support. Sure would be nice if we could follow our own advice.

ANNOUNCEMENT
by M. McNeil

Dear Sir: I wish you would print two announcements for me. One: A while back John Greenleaf offered me some badly needed STARTLINGs and ASTONISHINGs at a reasonable price. However, when I mailed him the money the letter came back marked "Moved, no forwarding address." So, will he please contact me. He said he read FSM. Two: Will any readers in the Houston area contact me? I am trying to form a fanclub.—*2010 McClendon, Houston 25, Texas.*

What, another?

VOX POPULI
by Donald V. Allgeier

Dear Mr. Mines: Now that our mags have a new head man, I feel like repeating some suggestions I have made before.

Merwin doesn't think the mags should be edited for the "Fans." But I do think the support of the fans would be sorely missed by the pro mags. There are quite a few of them and they have been loyal for many, many years. So I hope you won't completely ignore the wishes of fans. And one of those wishes is for more of the really old reprints.

You must realize that the reprint mags are not just sold to new readers. Like many other fans, I have read every issue of the old Wonder Stories and its forerunners and still have many of them. But we still buy the reprint mags to read again those great stories we haven't dug out of the files for many years and to have them in another form with new illustrations for our collections. Yes, we who have read the stories are even more eager for them than the newcomers to the field. And we would like to see a predominance of reprints from the Gernsback era and few from the "Thrilling" era, especially in the annual. (I think "Death of

Iron" is an excellent choice.)

Some often-made suggestions are for "Brood of Helios" by John Bertin, "Outpost on the Moon" by Joslyn Maxwell, and "Electropolis" by Otfried von Hanstein. Now that you've reprinted one foreign novel, reprint another—the best of Gernsback's many German importations. (Avoid Otto Willi Gail, his stuff is dull.) "Electropolis" is one of the finest of all gadget stories—and such stories and stories of Utopias have always been popular. If you ever go outside your own files, a really great story that deserves a second round is "Paradise and Iron" by Miles J. Breuer.

As for short stories, I am not suggesting any special ones, but merely pleading for certain authors who have been neglected. I refer to Hendrik Dahl Juve, Harl Vincent, Nat Schachner, A. L. Zagat, Gauain Edwards, D. D. Sharp, and the women authors, Leslie F. Stone, Lilith Lorraine, Clare Winger Harris. For Stone, how about "Men with Wings" and "Women with Wings?" Another excellent short story is "The Planet Entity" by Clark Ashton Smith.

Other suggestions: "Ark of the Covenant" by Victor MacClure, "The Moon Conquerors" by Romans. These stories remain in the memory as great even decades later. In spite of your own editorially expressed belief that they are inferior, there are many of us who feel that they stand re-reading much better than some of the modern stuff. And even if they didn't, they would be of interest for their picture of what stf was like then.

If you do come up to more recent times, I suggest "Five Steps to Tomorrow" by Binder and "Prisoner of Mars" by Hamilton. And please give us some Zagat and Schachner. They had many good ones—"Tower of Evil," "In the Year 2000" and the others that followed.

Referring again to the editorial in the Winter Quarterly, has it ever occurred to you that the majority might be right, or at least that what appeals to the majority would sell best? If the majority wants the older stories, I thought that was the original purpose of the mag. Or is the opinion of the minority, since it includes ye omnipotent editor, to be the guiding principle.

In conclusion, record another strong vote for the old stories—and especially by Juve, Vincent, Schachner. (Remember the latter's "Revolt of the Scientists" and "Memory of the Atoms."?)—*1023 W. San Antonio St., San Marco, Texas.*

This particular editor has little puritan in him, hence little desire to cram things down people's throats for their own good whether they like it or not. If we thought the majority wanted just the old Gernsback stuff it would be the easiest thing in the world to give it to them. But since an occasional letter, however literate and interesting, does not make a majority it provides no real indication. The editor is therefore forced to fall back upon his editorial judgment, human and fallible as it may be. It is basically what he is being paid for. We read literally hundreds of stories before we make a single

[*Turn page*]

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selection. If one of the old ones stands up, reads well, still seems interesting, we are happy to use it. But if it creaks and limps and the dialogue is something out of the Rover Boys and the characterization out of Little Women, and the plot one of the simple elementary ideas we have long grown away from, we feel a strong reluctance toward asking our readers to cough up two bits for it.

The dyed-in-the-wool fans might be glad to have it purely for their collections. Some of them might not even bother to read it—just collect it. But these are a very small minority —the large majority are neither fans nor collectors and if we are to make fans of them in the long run we must present stories which compare favorably in interest, color and skill with present day stories.

Stories have been written in all periods which are classics, which will bear repeating and rereading indefinitely. And there have been a lot of them. The Weinbaum stories were such, SLAN is of that caliber. There are others and buh-lieve me, we hunt for them. So don't give up hope, your favorites will eventually get a chance. Incidentally, thanks for the check list; will use it

APPRECIATION
by Larry Farsace

Dear Sam: Your magazine, FANTASTIC STORY, apparently is fast becoming a part of our household. We just finished reading Stanley G. Weinbaum's DAWN OF FLAME aloud, and agreed that it reads almost like a poem. It was really a beautiful experience and we could see more of the Robin Hood like vistas of that future world than if it had been made into a movie—which it probably will be, some day. One thing so many people forget is the inherent weakness of a movie in that it cannot portray an author's writing style, and to me anyway that means as much as the story itself.

I was particularly impressed in the similarity of writing mood (as well as story-type) between Weinbaum's tale and the old George Allen England trilogy, "Darkness and Dawn." I wonder if anybody else has noticed this? Incidentally, Finlay's portrayal of Black Margot was exquisitely drawn, and almost fit the vividly drawn word-image

Tell Lillian Carroll of your reader's department that I would like to get in touch with her if she can buy all the second-hand magazines she wants, as per her statement I only wish *I could!* If it was possible, here is a slight list of magazines, and real old ones too, that I'd like to have some day: First year Black Cat Magazine, Owl Magazine, Nickel Magazine, Thrill Book, probably the first of the fantasy magazines, as well as many amateur publications such as the Conservative, the Vagrant, the Saturnian, and thousands more of the fanmags

of the past decade or so. But one at a time will do! Here's hoping that you can print my above list!—*187 North Union St., Rochester 5, N. Y.*

That's an interesting point that a movie cannot portray the author's style. Generally speaking you would expect a movie, with its graphic visualization, to be much more effective. But it is a fact that a great many movies have been inferior to the books from which they were taken. Which lends emphasis to your statement.

COLLECTOR
by Margaret Kaufman

Dear Editor: I've just finished reading my fall ish of FSM. There were only two stories I didn't like at all. They were THE REPORTER and DISPLACED PERSON. TRAIL BLAZER was the most unusual S-F story I've read in ages. Next best I liked VERMIN and URANIAN JUSTICE. In my opinion THE COSMIC PANTOGRAPH and VIA ASTEROID barely made the "fair" mark. I wish you'd get more novels like BEYOND PLUTO.

By the way, if anyone has any S-F mags or books they'd like to get rid of, I'll take 'em.—*1020 S. Downing, Seaside, Oregon.*

I'd like to see you and Don Allgeier fight this out. He likes them real old and you rate them as we do, on an individual basis. In fact, I won't be surprised if you get a letter from him. .. ..

OOPSLA AGAIN
by Gregg Calkins

Dear Sam: This, I hope you realize, is the third letter I've written you so far this month. You edit quite a few mags, you know. But I had to drop you a line.

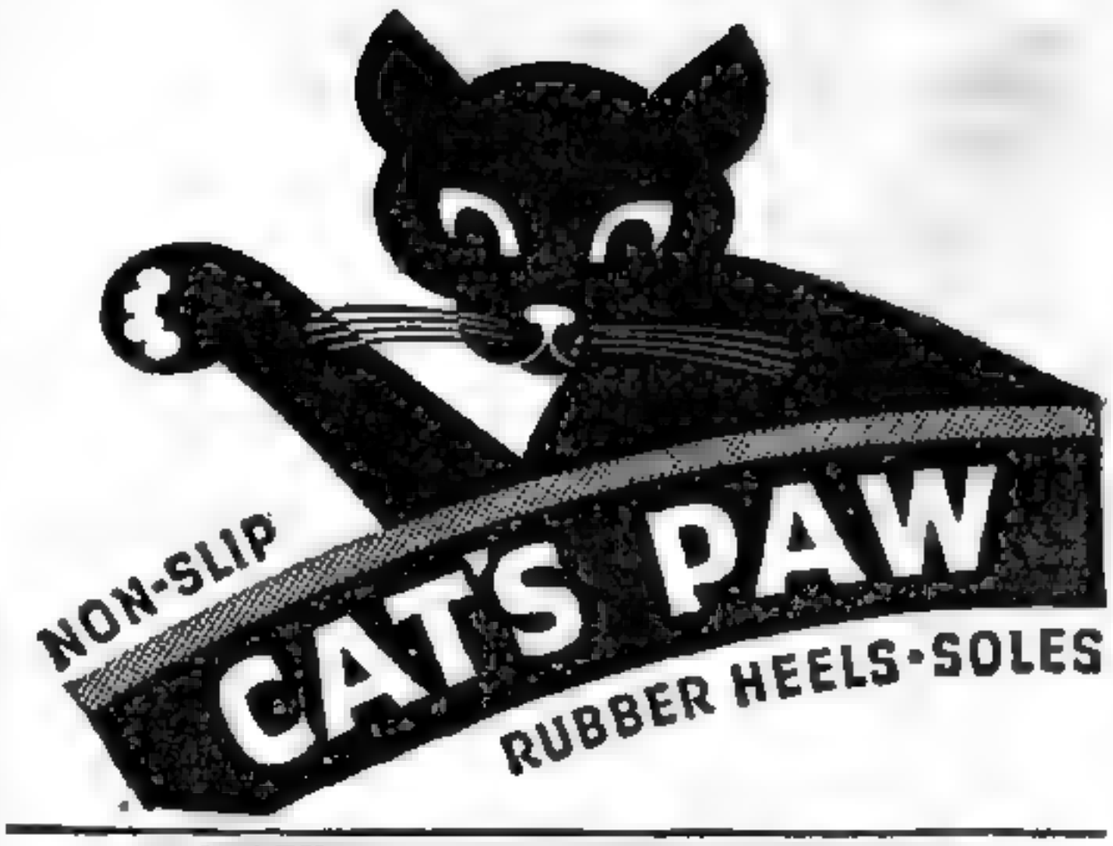
In your Spring '52 issue you presented two remarkable stories. In your blurbs, you promised an even greater story—SLAN—in future issues. I trust that by this time these are entirely your selections and not any of Merwin's. Let me say, then, thank you very much for that which you have given us, and congratulations. Presenting these stories is a masterpiece of editorship. We appreciate and respect it.

What more can I say? Oh, of course I could rave about the Schomburg cover or the terrific Lawrence interiors, and I could swear and yell over the letter column, but I won't. I'm too happy to do that now.

By the by, my own magazine OOPSLA is coming along ok, now. Everyone admits the first issue was a Class A, Number I stinker, but also admitted to a little, however small, bit of improvement in #2, so who can tell what will be in #3?

If this is printed in the Summer issue of FSM, the fourth issue of OOPSLA should just be out. A dime will bring both a sample copy and my blessings.

[*Turn page*]



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I'm afraid that I'm not very long winded this time, Sam, but that Spring issue just took my breath away. (It also made me so jittery that I can't type straight). I'll be under an oxygen mask until August.—*761 Oakley Street, Salt Lake City 16, Utah.*

Come out from under that oxygen mask and see what's slated for our next ish—A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER by Henry Kuttner. Did you see the review of OOPSLA by Jerry Bixby in SS?

NOMINATION
by John Greenleaf

Dear Sir: I nominate for FSM, THE MAN WHO AWOKE, the greatest time traveling story written and more logical than Wells' THE TIME MACHINE. It was reprinted in Captain Future.

Have you the Summer 1950 and Spring 1951 FSM still in stock?—*General Delivery, Meridian, Cal.*

Sorry, John, we do not stock back numbers, just keep one or two for our files. Try the fans.

HE'S REASONABLE
by Gab Hornstein

Dear Sam: Here I am again, to bother you in another mag. You see, I got all the new issues of all the SF publications out, and am now proceeding to tell deserving editors like yourself what I thought of theirs.

There's no two ways about it. The Black Flame was a very good novel. It kept me glued to a chair, and the chills ran up and down my scrawny spine, until the very last paragraph. I thought it was a bit silly though when he runs through an atomic explosion. Ha, he felt the atoms drumming against his ears. Now, perhaps you see, what I mean when I say faulty science doesn't help a story none. Why, man, he would have been a perfect example of the radiating man, with really a glowing personality, in the first few seconds. Otherwise, it was a pretty good story.

You bring up the topic of foreign authors and stories. Well, here is my own opinion again. I believe that the British tend to add more fantasy to their stories, while ours is . . . well science fiction. Frankly, I did not like Death of Iron. If I want to read an emotional story, with a dabbering of philosophy, and other such nick nacks I can think of a lot better authors, to read. When I sit down to read SF, I want to read SF, nothing in between. Besides, he did not do such a good job from the emotional angle either. In all, I will say, I found it boring, too drawn out, and overly melodramatic. (This refers to the undercurrent)

It was quite a surprise when I saw the name Sam Moskowitz, for it happens that there is a math teacher in my school, by the same name. I wonder.

Here is something I would like to clear up!! Time, and time again, I have read letters which say, "I think your mag is tops, the best in the

entire field." That's the biggest load I've ever seen. Why, in all the names of the devil, must they lay it on so thick, just to get a letter printed. Every author works hard on his stories, and the editors work just as hard trying to get a good selection for their mag. I do not think you allow the name of competing mags to be mentioned here, but I am going to throw a few at you. AS sometimes has some very good stories, such as their Brain which ran a short while ago. You, in turn have some good ones also, such as Vulcans Dolls, or this new one, Well Of The Worlds. But all of you have your bad stories, and you included. I think all the .25 pulps are about equal in their entertainment quality, and you can't say one is better than the other. I think that deep down you have to agree with me.

If anybody has a good SF collection they want to get off their hands I'll buy them at a reasonable price. (REASONABLE.!) Science Fictionally your,—*246 Peshine Avenue, Newark 8, N. J.*

Who says we have to agree with you?

Seriously, of course we've read good stories in other mags. But every magazine reflects the personal responses of its editors and so over a period of time will display a distinct character. It is this which gives a magazine personality and which makes it appeal to some readers over others. So they tell me.

FAVORITE FAN
by Jim Harmon

Dear Mr. Mines: The Spring FANTASTIC STORY was certainly a special treat—like a double-dip chocolate cone on a hot day. Everything was very tasty—the cover, the lay-out, the typography, the illustrations, and of course the stories. Weinbaum was really a pretty good writer, wasn't he? I know because I can distinctly remember every Weinbaum story I've ever read, and in the decade I've been reading science-fiction I've engulfed literally millions upon millions of words of imaginative literature; some several odd million too many to remember. The ones I do remember make up really outstanding stories.

(In case I haven't told you lately, one of the stories freshest in my memory is Samuel Mines' *Find the Sculptor* which I consider to be the greatest time travel short story ever written.)

Next time, I see you have another special issue: SLAN. If this keeps up, FANTASTIC STORY is going to become one of my favorites. However, let me tell you a confidential item: SLAN was not published in any WONDER, STARTLING, CAPTAIN FUTURE, or any other of your magazines. Isn't that astounding? A lot of fans found it so, when the news came out. I didn't. I am just a poor, little fan with no sources of information; I know nobody who is somebody, and hardly anybody who is nobody. Yet I knew months in advance. How? Well, you let the information drop in one of your letter departments some time back. Apparently nobody else found out this way, but then, who reads letter departments?

[*Turn page*]

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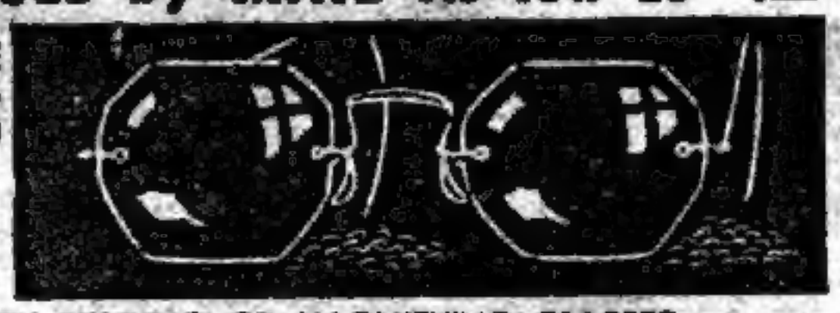

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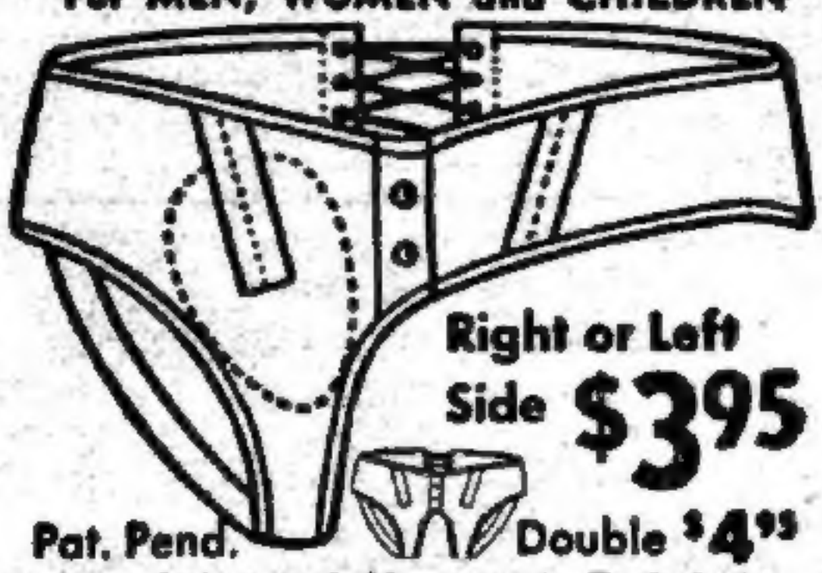

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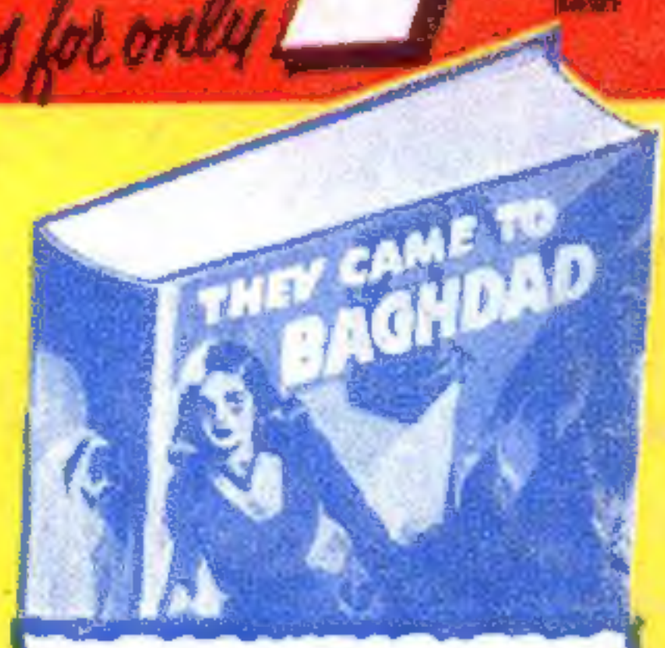

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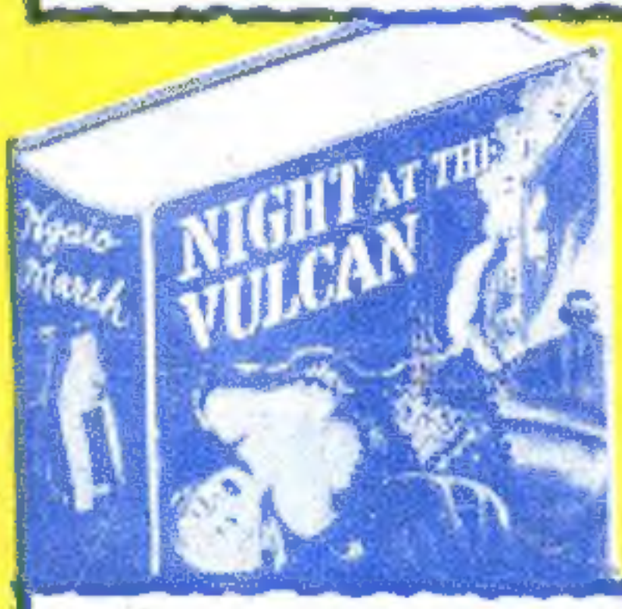

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